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The Future of the Philosophy of Religion

Boston Studies in Philosophy, Religion and Public Life

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Editors

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Chapter 1

Introduction



M. David Eckel

Abstract The essays in this volume grew out of a symposium in the early 2000s in Boston University's Institute for Philosophy and Religion. The purpose of that symposium was to bring together a group of recent Ph.D.s in the philosophy of religion to discuss the future of their field. Many of the members of that group have now gone on to important positions of leadership in departments of Philosophy and the Study of Religion. In Spring 2017, we invited the members of that group to reconvene in Boston to reconsider the discussions of our first symposium and think again about the future of the field. With the addition of several new voices, the essays in this volume represent the results of that discussion and give a vivid account of the vitality and relevance of philosophical perspectives in the study of religion.

Keywords Philosophy of Religion · the Study of Religion · Religious Studies

A lot of ink has been spilled in recent years about the changing role of the Philosophy of Religion in the field of Religious Studies. Whether this change is to be lamented or to be cheered has been a point of debate, but it is clear that the diversification of Religious Studies in the last few decades no longer permits any easy assumptions about the relevance of philosophy in the study of religion. The questions that had long dominated the field seemed parochial, and new theoretical orientations seemed to bypass the classic philosophical accounts of religion in favor of approaches that grounded religious studies more closely in the lives of actual practitioners.

When I became Director of Boston University's Institute for Philosophy and Religion in the early 2000's, I felt that the time had come to pose this problem to a group of newly-minted philosophers of religion and see how they envisioned the future of their field. We called our symposium "The Future of the Philosophy of

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Religion,” but it could just as well have been called “Of the Future by the Future.” We were asking a group of promising young scholars to comment on a future that they themselves would have an opportunity to create. The symposium was a great success, and several of its participants went on to make major contributions to the field. In addition to the scholars whose essays appear in this volume, we could also mention Garth W. Green, the John W. McConnell Professor of Philosophy of Religion at McGill, Parimal G. Patil, Professor of Religion and Indian Philosophy at Harvard, and Thomas A. Lewis, Professor of Religious Studies at Brown. Prof. Lewis’s influential book *Why Philosophy Matters for the Study of Religion & Vice Versa* (Oxford 2015) grew in part out of discussion at that symposium.

The contributions to this initial symposium lay dormant for several years, as the participants moved forward with their careers. Finally, in 2017 we decided to revisit the topic to see how the conversation had changed. Participants in the original symposium were invited to reconvene at Boston University, several new participants were added, and the conversation flourished. The participants’ interests had changed, but there was the same conviction that the philosophy of religion had a strong role to play not only in the future of Religious Studies, but the future of the Humanities as a whole. The essays gathered in this volume are the results of that second symposium. We hope that they will demonstrate the variety, the intellectual strength, and the continuing relevance of philosophy in the study of religion.

The volume begins with a broad overview of the problems facing philosophy of religion as a discipline in Religious Studies. Wesley J. Wildman’s “Reading Tea Leaves, Drinking Tea: Four Transformations in Philosophy of Religion” gives a sober analysis of changes in North American higher education that have led to the decline of philosophy of religion as a field in the Humanities. Wildman’s analysis is based on empirical studies of scholars in the field, and it functions as a challenge to measure the contribution of many of the essays in this volume. Many of them are concerned about precisely the issues that concern Wildman: the development of a *global perspective* in the study of religion, the challenge of *critical theory*, the inclusion of *multiple disciplinary perspectives*, and a broad-based interest in the study of *religious practices and the solution of real-world problems*.

Dan Arnold’s essay, “What Religious Studies Can Teach the Humanities: A Philosophical Perspective,” tackles a problem that has preoccupied critics of the philosophy of religion, to say nothing of philosophers themselves: What is the proper role of “normativity” in the study of religion? It is often said that the function of scholars of religion should be to describe religion, not render judgment about value or truth. Arnold shows that normativity is pervasive not only in Religious Studies, but in the Humanities more generally, and philosophy of religion plays a crucial role in identifying and clarifying normative considerations that, in Arnold’s words, “inexorably distinguish human activity as such.” He illustrates his point by discussing recent controversies about the status of religion in American constitutional law. These controversies are central to American public life, and scholars of religion have a crucial role to play in their resolution.

The next two essays, Kevin Schilbrack on “Religious Practices and the Formation of Subjects” and Timothy D. Knepper on “Philosophy of Lived Religion,” take up

Wildman's fourth challenge about the importance of religious practice. Each essay gives an imaginative and thoughtful account of the way philosophy of religion can expand beyond its traditional intellectual preoccupations and address issues that are central to the contemporary practice of Religious Studies. Andrew Chignell's essay on "Liturgical Philosophy of Religion: An Untimely Manifesto" deals with a similar question of religious practice, although from a different perspective. Chignell applies the classic insights of analytic philosophy of religion to the states of belief that are presupposed by participation in various liturgical practices. His essay shows how much suppleness and imagination is possible within the categories of traditional philosophy of religion.

Next comes a group of essays that can be understood as responding to the challenge of critical theory. Elizabeth Pritchard's essay, "Belief that Matters: Religion, anti-Black Racism and the Future of the Philosophy of Religion," makes a powerful case for the materiality of belief, as it applies particularly to relationship between aspects of American Christianity and anti-black racism. Andrew Dole's essay on "Critical Theory, Conspiracy, and 'Gullible Critique'" tackles critical theory head-on, applying Bruno Latour's account of the resemblance between critique and conspiracy theories. It is, if you will, a critique of critical theory. In this group might be included Mark Larrimore's eloquent essay on "Learning to do Philosophy of Religion in the Anthropocene" and David Decosimo's "Skills without Values, Rallies without Virtues: Beyond Hipster Heideggerianism and Shining Things." When Larrimore first presented this essay in our 2017 symposium, the concept of the Anthropocene had less currency than it does today, but Larrimore's argument about a future "where the vertiginous loss of long-taken-for-granted futures" is no less powerful. It envisions a radically different future for the field, and it is deeply critical of business as usual in philosophy of religion and the Humanities more generally. Decosimo's essay addresses a controversial, recent book by Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age*. Decosimo argues that its vision of a "non-supernatural polytheism" falls short in several significant ways, particularly in the realm of religious ethics.

Wildman's remarks about the importance of a global perspective in philosophy of religion can be taken to mean that the field should attend more carefully to traditions that have operated in one way or another at the margins of conventional accounts of the philosophy of religion. Michael Zank's essay, "A Peripheral Field: Meditations on the Status of Jewish Philosophy," and Sarah Hammerschlag's "Nearly Neighbors: Reflections on Philosophy of Religion and its close encounters with Modern Jewish Thought" give fascinating accounts of the way the field looks from the perspective of Jewish philosophy. In Zank's case the image of marginality begins with a passage in the book of Leviticus: "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest" (Lev. 23:22). He places Jewish philosophy of religion in this liminal space, at the edge of the main streams of Jewish life and at the edge of mainstream philosophy of religion. This position gives it distinctive critical authority to comment on significant features of both. Sarah Hammerschlag charts the historical development

of Jewish philosophy in Germany and France at the beginning of the twentieth century and shows how deeply Jewish thinkers were involved in the modern investigation of the concept of religion. Both of these essays draw Jewish philosophy from the margins into the center of the theoretical study of religion. M. David Eckel's essay, "Who or What Created the World? Bhāviveka's Arguments against the Hindu Idea of God," does the same for the debate between Buddhists and Hindus about the nature of God. In some respects it is utterly foreign, yet it deals with an issue that has been central to traditional Western accounts of the philosophy of religion.

The next two essays in the volume show a philosophical engagement with other fields in the humanities, as Wesley Wildman mentioned in his call for the inclusion of multiple disciplinary perspectives. Allen Speight's essay "On the Past and Future of Religion, Art and Philosophy" notes important similarities between theoretical discussion of the nature of art and similar discussions about the nature of religion. Kenneth Reinhard's "Psychoanalysis and the Monotheistic Origins of Modern Science" relies on Lacan's interpretation of Freud to speculate about the future of religion itself.

Finally, we conclude the volume with two essays that were first presented as part of a series on "Philosophy and the Future of Religion." David Lamberth's essay, "William James Revisited: 'Pragmatic' Approaches to Religion," gives a fascinating commentary on the relevance of William James for thinking not just about the philosophy of religion but about religion itself. Jean-Luc Marion's "God and the Ambivalence of Being" shows the strength and continued relevance of traditional studies in theology and metaphysics. Marion's eloquent essay shows that the tradition is alive and well and deserves to be part of any discussion of the future of philosophy of religion.

We hope that the variety, the imagination, and the intellectual seriousness of the essays in this volume speak well for the future of philosophy in the study of religion. While we take seriously Wesley Wildman's account of the difficulties in the field, our experience of the philosophy of religion is one of astonishing adaptability and vitality. We also realize, in spite of the variety of perspectives included here, that important perspectives have been left out. Much more can and should be said about philosophy and gender studies in religion. Non-Western perspectives, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and Chinese traditions are crucial components in the study of religion and need to be drawn more fully into discussion of the future of our field. But we hope that this volume will serve as a reminder of the many ways philosophical perspectives can enhance the study of religion and stimulate thinking about its future as a field.

Chapter 2

Reading Tea Leaves, Drinking Tea: Four Transformations in Philosophy of Religion



Wesley Wildman

Abstract Four transformations are impacting all universities in North Atlantic cultures and often beyond: the global transformation, the critical transformation, the multidisciplinary transformation, and the practical transformation. The academic field of philosophy of religion has been slow to respond to the associated challenges, even though its departmental homes – philosophy and academic religious studies – have proved to be more agile, at least in some respects. The implacable social reality of these transformations affords criteria for estimating the future of philosophy of religion and recent field-wide empirical studies add specificity. Using these resources, it is possible to read the tea leaves, understand what’s happening, and imagine what is required to reverse the trend of rapid contraction of academic positions in philosophy of religion.

Keywords Philosophy of religion · Religious studies · Academia · Globalization · Humanities

2.1 Introduction

Ask yourself: Why is philosophy of religion so rarely about *religion in all its complexity* (as articulated in the academic study of religion generally) but rather typically focuses narrowly on worldview beliefs, often limited to a particular religious tradition (usually Christianity) or set of religious traditions (usually theisms)? Why is philosophy of religion operating at such a distance from *critical theories* of every kind that are ascendant in other parts of the contemporary academy? Why does philosophy of religion *so rarely respond to developments in other university disciplines* that are highly relevant to the understanding of religion, from fundamental physics to evolutionary biology, from cognitive neuroscience to political economy,

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and from cultural history to literary theory? When was the last time a philosopher of religion made an influential contribution to public discourse on any subject in North Atlantic cultures, *as a philosopher of religion*?

While you are at it, ask yourself why university positions specializing in and named for philosophy of religion are *disappearing* in North Atlantic cultures.

The first four of these questions draw attention to transformations well underway within the academy in many parts of the world and around the borders of philosophy of religion itself. The final question points to one of the prices paid by philosophy of religion for being so slow to recognize and respond to these transformations. This essay – and it is an essay, an exploration, a musing, rather than a technical analysis of something or other – meditates on these four transformations as challenges that philosophy of religion must navigate in the future. But merely reading tea leaves is not enough to address the problems our discipline faces. We need to *drink the tea*, to change the way we operate. If we don't, we'll perish within serious academic contexts and philosophy of religion will be reinvented in another generation by people who do it better than us and are worthier of the designation *philosopher of religion*. They'll look back on us as squandering our birthright in exchange for the comfort of doing things that feel familiar despite their increasing irrelevance.

You may be able to detect from the tone of this opening that I am provoked by the failure of our field to adopt the global, critical, multidisciplinary, practical (GCMP) orientation that I think is a condition for its long-term survival and value. My perception is informed by investing the last 5 years in studying philosophy of religion as an academic field, striving to understand how it works and why it is slow to change. At one level the answer is obvious: philosophers of religion are seriously talented people with plenty to do, and a GCMP orientation just isn't in their bailiwick. The blog-based discussions I've sponsored at PhilosophyOfReligion.org show just how good their minds are. They have generated first-rate insights into what philosophy of religion is, what norms define high quality work in the field, and what its role in the wider academy might be. In light of those impressive contributions by so many professional philosophers of religion, I have fallen in love with my home field all over again. But that has only amplified my concern. Why are these super-smart, super-talented people utterly failing to reverse the dismaying trend of their marginalization within today's academy?

The answer is painful to contemplate: we are applying our beautiful minds to the wrong questions within our field, not learning from the wider academy about how we could do our work better, and failing to see how we are perceived more broadly within the few parts of the academy that still pay any attention to our work. As a group – demographically speaking, if you like, which allows for exceptions – we are brilliant but comfortable, unconsciously clinging to the security of tenured professorial positions, depending on the implicit institutional support of religious organizations, lacking in restless curiosity, and failing to read the tea leaves. The few who do read accurately don't usually drink the tea. The very few who do drink the tea are regarded by their colleagues as having drunk Kool-Aid instead. So we are getting nowhere fast. And I do mean *nowhere*: when lines formerly named for philosophy of religion in both religion and philosophy departments open due to retirements or

departures, they are often transformed into something else – another branch of philosophy, another areas-studies focus within the academic study of religion – and the philosophy of religion positions continue to dry up.

Are we really going to stand by and watch this happen?

In addition to experience and countless discussions and panels on the future of philosophy of religion with a rich variety of colleagues, two sources of data guide the interpretation offered here.

- First, the Values in the Study of Religion project (VISOR; visorproject.org) generated data from 704 specialists in the study of religion, 499 of whom completed an Academic Identity survey in which they identified their academic specialization and their professional associated affiliations. Six major specialization categories were identified (Ethics, Groups, Histories, Ideas, Minds, Texts) and 108 respondents identified the Ideas category as their academic home; that category includes 35 philosophers of religion based on professional association data.
- Second, invited professional philosophers of religion presented their thoughts on specified topics at PhilosophyOfReligion.org, and these blogs, as well as the entire collection of 621 philosophers of religion in the site's database, generate many valuable insights. A total of 54 philosophers blogged about the question "What is the philosophy of religion?" in year 1 and we have published an analysis of their thoughts (Wildman and Rohr 2017). Further, 67 philosophers wrote on year 2's question: "What does philosophy of religion offer to the modern university?" And 50 philosophers (and counting) have contributed their thoughts on "What norms or values define excellent philosophy of religion?" during year 3.

VISOR presents powerful evidence of the drying up of philosophy of religion positions, confirming appearances. Respondents born in the 1950s or earlier are represented in the VISOR sample to the same degree both inside philosophy of religion (31.4%) and outside (32.1%). For people born in the 1960s or later, however, there is a precipitous decline within philosophy of religion. For example, respondents born in the 1970s or later amount to 2.9% inside philosophy of religion and 23.3% outside – the difference is a shocking factor of 8. The shrinkage problem is real, not merely paranoid perception. The preliminary challenge is to understand it. The ultimate challenge is to rethink the field of philosophy of religion and the conditions of its operation within contemporary colleges and universities.

2.2 The Global Transformation

Two groups of philosophers of religion endorse truth in advertising. One is the Society of Christian Philosophers (SCP), who frankly identify themselves and their work as being from and for Christianity. The other is the more marginalized crew of philosophers who actually take religion, as understood within the academic study of religion, to be their subject matter; they are the global philosophers of religion (GPR). We see some of these in the Theology Without Walls movement, some in the comparative

philosophy and comparative theology movements, and some in the Global-Critical Philosophy of Religion unit within the American Academy of Religion.

The SCP group is in ongoing dialogue primarily with the Christian doctrinal tradition, focuses almost exclusively on beliefs, and is distinguished from systematic Christian theology mainly by the (typically) analytical philosophical tools employed. This is a well-trodden path, the approach is socially stable with lineages of discussion clearly identified, and some colleges and universities consistently hire philosophers of the SCP kind.

The GPR group is in dialogue with the academic study of religion, and thus takes beliefs, practices, experiences, and the embodied and embedded aspects of religions to be the relevant subject matters for philosophy of religion. They are younger, often not Christian and often idiosyncratically religious or not religious at all, typically trained in religious studies as well as philosophy, and striving for reform within the field. Their research is methodologically diverse and the entire effort is relatively new so there are fewer clearly identified lineages of discussion and debate.

Aside from the SCP and GPR philosophers, there is a group of philosophers of religion who neither belong to the SCP nor deal with the academic study of religion. They are as cognitively obsessed with beliefs as the SCP group but, despite mostly identifying as Christian, they are more likely to focus on theism in general than on Christianity specifically. A few focus on other religious traditions, a few are atheist, and a few are interested in non-belief, secularism, non-theistic religions, religious naturalism, and religious atheism. These folk are typically trained in philosophy departments, they are age-tilted toward tenured professors and away from newly minted PhDs, and their positions are most likely not going to be filled with a philosopher of religion when they depart. I'll call them traditional philosophers of religion (TPR).

I believe it is fair to ask: To whom among these three groups does the label "philosophy of religion" best apply? This is a particularly urgent question when considering hiring realities within religion departments, which are exquisitely sensitive to deployments of the word "religion." I think the answer here is that only GPR philosophers can reasonably apply the phrase to themselves. But the first year of blog entries at PhilosophyOfReligion.org shows how few positions are held by the GPR crew: less than 6% of respondents gave significant hints of a global orientation to philosophy of religion.

It is difficult to know what happens in faculty meetings when a position formerly designated for philosophy of religion comes up for discussion due to a faculty departure. Philosophy departments are interested in philosophers, above all, with the quality of philosophical work judged in different ways depending on which philosophical traditions are most highly valued within the department. It is a huge stretch for most of them to hire junior faculty graduating from a religious studies program specializing in philosophy of religion, which is where you find most of the GPR philosophers. It is also a stretch in many places to hire a philosopher from the SCP group because the "from and for Christianity" dimension of such a hire may be inconsistent with a prevailing departmental identity of secular-academic philosophy. But SCP philosophers can still get jobs in the venues explicitly or implicitly organized around Christian confessional commitments.

Meanwhile, religion departments, especially in trend-setting research universities, are rarely hiring philosophers of religion because SCP prominence and the neglect of religious-studies interests within philosophy of religion imply that the philosophy of religion operates very differently than secular, academic religious studies. SCP graduates can sometimes get jobs in religious studies departments, but typically only in venues where philosophy and religion are still studied together, which means not in research universities. GPR graduates are far more likely to get jobs in religion departments, including in research-university settings, except that the prevalence of the SCP orientation has convinced most in religion departments that philosophy of religion stands for covert Christian ideology. So most newly open lines are redirected to an area-studies topic, which fits the religious-studies orientation better.

Demographically speaking, the TPR group is dying out. The SCP group is sufficiently socially stable and institutionally viable that it is producing younger scholars but the number of SCP philosophers with tenured positions is slowly contracting as the ideals of the secular academy steadily spread from research universities to the more diverse world of liberal arts colleges. The globally minded GPR group is young and eager for a revolution. They alone address religion in all its richness and complexity. But they are outsized and battling uphill against the placement realities I have described.

Here is a projection based on the foregoing: If the philosophy of religion is to survive as a university field, it will be because the transformation to a global approach gains ascendancy. This will require religion departments to distinguish appropriately between philosophy of religion as covertly (or, in the case of SCP, explicitly) Christian and philosophy of religion as global in scope and not solely cognitivist in orientation – and that is likely to occur in the long run. It will also require philosophy departments to embrace a more global orientation, which is already happening and is very likely to continue, quite apart from the dynamics within the sub-field of philosophy of religion. Thus, we are in a transition period where the global transformation in philosophy and the secular transformation in the academic study of religion are both part-way through. Only GPR can survive both transformations so they define the future of the philosophy of religion, at least in this respect. Critical to *meaningful* survival is that philosophy comes out on the other side as *philosophy*: making and analyzing arguments, exploring ideas both actual and possible, clarifying concepts and using those intellectual skills to interpret other aspects of human life, including religion and non-religion.

2.3 The Critical Transformation

The global transformation is underway but currently thwarted, a revolution held in check. Something similar can be said of the rise of critical consciousness within philosophy of religion. The Anglo-American analytic tradition of philosophy has been slow to engage critical theory in its manifold forms – not for nothing, since critical theory is often associated with a cynical dismissal of truth, accuracy, evidence, and literal reference. The American pragmatist tradition has done more but it

is the Continental tradition that leads the way. The critical transformation as it relates specifically to philosophy of religion springs from European philosophers and has been spreading through the English-speaking world thanks to translations of writings from those European luminaries.

I mean something quite specific by “critical transformation” – I’m referring to the parts of the so-called critical turn that are likely to be long-lived, as against passing trends in academia; the parts that express discoveries about reality and human interpretation, not fads with self-collapsing conceptual spines. Critical theory in general springs from the dawning awareness that our cultural practices and moral norms are socially constructed. The social construction of cultural reality has enormous effects on every aspect of human life. It operates reflexively to reduce cognitive load for people navigating the inter-personal intricacies of culture, increasing the evolutionary viability of a cultural formation. It centralizes authority and power both to optimize efficiency of social problem-solving and to consolidate privileged access to social and material benefits. It is difficult to detect because it is habituated through learning and training, though some aspects of it are easier to detect for those who may suffer when power is deployed at their expense. It is reinforced through narratives related to cultural identity and cosmologized religious worldviews, and through a variety of means of social control including punishment for dissenters. The social construction of cultural reality is hard to change for all these reasons: it is useful, it marshals social power, it is hidden, and it hijacks resources for reinforcement.

The critical turn in a variety of fields, including both philosophy and the academic study of religion, pivots on this awareness and then spins to confront one situation after another where the side effects of our socially constructed world are sources of great suffering – especially when redressing the problem involves confronting unjust power and canny or ignorant privilege. The imperative driving the critical turn is a natural one, I think – alleviate suffering and increase fairness – but, historically speaking, German philosopher Karl Marx was one of the first to associate the unmasking of our socially constructed worlds and revolutionary commitments to mitigating suffering and increasing justice. The Marxist lineage in critical theory is unmistakable, though endorsement of Marxist political systems is relatively rare. We can’t live without socially constructed worlds and we can’t live with their unjust consequences so we must balance advantages against disadvantages by mounting critiques aimed at greater fairness and ultimately by building critical feedback systems that regulate socially constructed worlds more effectively.

Once our consciousness is raised and we learn to see the social construction of reality – how it works, how it is maintained, its sometimes horrific side effects, its cheating heart in the form of privilege, its brutal neglect of the downtrodden – it is natural for philosophers to want to join the fight on the side of the vulnerable against their oppressors. Many philosophers have joined the fight, in their distinctively head-heavy ways, though it is fought on many fronts simultaneously so they don’t appear to be a unified group. Marx battled over economic injustice and exploitation, but it wasn’t long before feminist philosophers took up arms, and soon after that the themes of racism and colonialism came into the sights of justice-minded philosophers. Then came eco-justice and a new wave of thinking about economic justice.

Within the academic study of religion, the very category of “religion” came under fire as it dawned on specialists that it is fraught with colonialist pretensions and distortions. Some even refuse to use the word for these reasons, in a kind of ascetic moral protest, even though we do appear to need such a category. This line of critique is slowly filtering into philosophy of religion, at least among the globally minded GPR crew, who deeply engage academic religious studies.

When religion departments consider philosophers of religion as candidates for open professorial positions, they often have in mind (among many other considerations) the responsiveness of these candidates to issues raised within critical theory. This mindset is fairly widespread within religion departments at the present time and they naturally seek compatible outlooks in their new colleagues. What do they find? How does philosophy of religion appear to religion experts as far as its critical consciousness is concerned?

- VISOR respondents from the Ideas category looked like the other categories regarding mean birth year (1961), percentage of Caucasians (84.3%), affluence, religious orthodoxy, and religious service attendance. They were politically a bit less liberal than the rest of the pool, which leans hard left; they had the lowest percentage of women (30.6%) and were more interested in religion than average.
- Narrowing the focus to self-identified members of scholarly associations related to philosophy of religion, the philosophers of religion are almost twice as likely to be tenured as others (because they are older, despite the age parity in the Ideas category described above, and because so few young philosophers of religion are winning tenure-track jobs), they are half as likely as others to be women (20% versus 41%), they are more affluent than others (possibly an effect of the gender wage gap in academia), they are only slightly less likely to be Caucasian (80.0% versus 86.4%), they are much more likely to regard religion as important (93.8% versus 74.4%), and they are dominantly from the Northeast region of the USA (24.3% versus 14.9%).
- At PhilosophyOfReligion.org, almost 20% of respondents to the first-year blog invitation were female; of the entire list of 621 professional philosophers of religion listed on the site, 20.0% are female – less than half the rate in the academic study of religion as a whole.
- Digging deeper to detect the presence of critical theory within philosophy of religion, the first year of blog entries at PhilosophyOfReligion.org ($N = 51$) showed zero hints of significant presence of critical theory in conversation with philosophy, from gender to race, and from post-colonialism to eco-justice. Rather, the leading controversies engaged were apologetics (for and against), arguments for an agential God’s existence, the adequacy of rationality, and religious language and meaning – all good topics, but not reflective of the critical turn.

It appears that the critical turn has not taken hold among many established professional philosophers of religion and, given the age distribution, probably never will. The great pile of textbooks introducing philosophy of religion confirms the lack of interest in critical theory, as well as the merely peripheral engagement with

global philosophy and global religion. By contrast, many in the youngest generation, those philosophers struggling to access the rapidly contracting pool of available professorial positions in philosophy of religion, have made the critical turn. These include the philosophers working in the American Academy of Religion's Global-Critical Philosophy of Religion unit, trying to create a new type of introductory textbook and struggling to realize a transformation in the field. They are outnumbered and relatively liminal in terms of their presence within the field. But they are far more in tune with the critical and global transformations in both philosophy generally and the academic study of religion, and thus more likely to represent the future of the field in the long run.

Philosophers mindful of the critical transformation are among the few with a chance of winning jobs in religious studies departments. But do these philosophers preserve the character of philosophy by avoiding dissolution of the conditions for the very possibility of philosophy as a meaningful activity? On the whole, I think they do. They are forging a middle-path between self-destructive protest and obliviousness, and they are doing it *as philosophers*. The future of philosophy of religion is in good hands with them – or it would be, if they could get jobs.

2.4 The Multidisciplinary Transformation

Even less developed than the global and critical transformations within philosophy of religion is the multidisciplinary transformation. This transformation is one of the most prominent features within the contemporary academy, with experts striving to address problems with multidisciplinary methods because those problems remain intractable using tools from any single university discipline. In particular, the field of philosophy boasts many multidisciplinary entanglements, with generative analyses of the human and natural sciences within the philosophy of science, penetrating engagement with neuroscience and artificial intelligence in philosophy of mind, and profound engagements with mathematics, logic, computer science, political theory, ecology, medicine, and a host of other disciplinary domains in other philosophical subdisciplines. This multidisciplinary orientation is only broadening as philosophers incorporate empirical perspectives into their arguments and allow all forms of knowledge to deepen their interpretations.

The philosophy of religion specialization lags far behind both the field of philosophy and the university world as a whole. There is almost no sign of a multidisciplinary orientation in the first year of blogs at PhilosophyofReligion.org on “What is philosophy of religion?” Even the second year’s blogs on “What can philosophy of religion contribute to the university?” rarely endorse multidisciplinary engagement, focusing instead on the capacity of philosophy of religion to help clarify concepts and evaluate the validity and soundness of arguments – in short, teaching students how to think. While philosophy of religion certainly does that, as all philosophy should, there is every reason to think that most of the topics engaged within the field would benefit from the wealth of information on those very same topics

generated across the entire spectrum of university disciplines. Sadly, it is not easy to detect that promise in introductory philosophy of religion textbooks. Philosophers of religion seem willing to talk in detail about the human condition without incorporating insights from biology and medicine; similarly, they are willing to talk about belief in God without dealing with the earth-shaking developments in cognitive science and evolutionary theory that help to explain the emergence and efficacy of such beliefs, regardless of their accuracy.

Considered as a strictly humanities venture, academic religious studies is a rich multidisciplinary engagement among history, languages, text-studies, cultural anthropology, political science, and the theoretical wing of sociology. Humanities religion scholars routinely engage fellow humanities scholars in relevant disciplines and the work produced is of higher quality because of those connections. That multidisciplinary self-consciousness within academic religious studies is impressive but it is not present within the field of philosophy of religion to anything like the same degree. Yet there is another way in which the multidisciplinary quality of religious studies is sorely limited. Religious studies sees itself as dominantly a humanities discipline, yet humanities disciplines currently generate only half of the literature on religion each year, with the other half coming from scientific approaches or multidisciplinary methods that integrate scientific findings. Stretching to the natural sciences, medicine, brain sciences, psychological sciences, and the empirical wing of sociology is routine for very few scholars of religion, and they are rarely located in departments of religious studies. The deranged double result is that the “other half” of the literature on religion is being produced by people who tend not to benefit from the wealth of knowledge humanities religious studies scholars have amassed, and religious studies is not benefitting from the breakthrough discoveries about religion emanating from the sciences. That’s a serious problem for everyone, and a dark portent for the future of science-averse religious studies. But philosophers of religion are no better on that score. In fact, philosophers of religion rarely even engage other humanities disciplines, beyond the interest that historians of philosophy sometimes have in social history (not strong enough, according to social historians).

Is there a price paid for this neglect of multidisciplinary within philosophy of religion? Judging from religious studies, philosophy, and the university as a whole, the answer is obviously yes. Even theology is intensively multidisciplinary compared with philosophy of religion! I can hear the protests... Don’t philosophers deal exclusively with arguments? How could detailed knowledge of evolutionary biology and medicine possibly help a philosopher of religion working on arguments about human nature? How is cognitive science supposed to help a philosopher of religion in talking about the origins and persuasiveness of religious beliefs? I consider it a tragedy, and a travesty, that multidisciplinary awareness is so curtailed within the field of philosophy of religion that answers to these questions are not already obvious. Even for the most analytically minded philosophers, translating an argument into symbolic logic to evaluate its validity is an activity fraught with hermeneutical complexities, all of which commit the philosopher to relevant forms of multidisciplinary engagement. Evaluating the soundness of arguments involves

judging their premises, which is a similarly complex hermeneutical undertaking involving evidence weighing and necessarily presupposing multidisciplinary perspectives. When philosophers venture beyond sheer analysis of arguments to offering interpretations of complex subject matters related to religion, which is common especially in the American and Continental traditions, the multidisciplinary entanglements and corresponding criteria for excellence of interpretation are even more intense.

The university as a whole, philosophy as a whole, humanities religious studies as a whole, and the scientific study of religion as a whole are *not wrong about this*: multidisciplinary engagement is critical for excellence in all domains of human inquiry at the present time. This applies to philosophy of religion, too. Yet, with some notable and welcome exceptions, most philosophers in our field ignore the multidisciplinary transformation. What's worse is that the younger generation of philosophers among the globally, critically minded GPR crew are little more advanced in this respect than their older colleagues who hold the steadily evaporating pool of tenured positions in philosophy of religion. Witness the near-absence of multidisciplinary reflection within the Global-Critical Philosophy of Religion unit within the American Academy of religion: even these young guns, fully on board with the global and critical transformations, are mostly out of step with the multidisciplinary transformation underway in the contemporary research university.

This is a reason to think that philosophy of religion just won't make it – in the specific sense that we won't succeed in reversing the dramatic contraction of available positions – and will have to be reinvented at some point in the future by philosophers who take multidisciplinary as seriously as contemporary universities do. Yet, if we take a cue from the younger generation of philosophers, who have embraced the multidisciplinary transformation, it ought to be possible for younger philosophers of religion to do the same.

2.5 The Practical Transformation

The final transformation for discussion here is triggered by critical-theoretic analysis of university cultures within their wider societies. What roles do universities play in the wider culture? Clearly, they *extend the base of knowledge* that defines one dimension of richness of human cultures, alongside other cultural dimensions such as art, music, cuisine, and literature. Building this base of knowledge and understanding are vital achievements and make cultures worth protecting. This is why events from the destruction of the Alexandrian Library during the Roman Empire to the looting of Iraqi museums in 2003 were such calamitous tragedies. But there is more to university relevance than this: some aspects of university research also *solve real-world problems*. This is most obvious in venues such as medicine, public health, engineering, and clinical psychology but the practical relevance of university research for solving pressing social problems is evident in a wide variety of disciplines, to different degrees.

One of the reasons for the marginalizing of the humanities disciplines – the so-called crisis of the humanities – is its lack of practical applications relative to other university research endeavors. This is so despite the essential role played by the humanities in extending and deepening the base of knowledge that guides understanding of human nature and the relationship of human beings to the wider world. Humanities scholars never want to fail to respond to that basic calling but they also need to develop translational skills to survive. That can be done without sacrificing scholarly integrity and it can be done in such a way as to improve the quality of research in fields outside the humanities.

The practical transformation has become evident in recent years as universities have backed expansion of research in the sciences that explicitly aims to improve human welfare by solving pressing medical, material, and engineering challenges. Humanities scholars rarely drink from that particular trough of relevance so they wind up off to the side, appreciated as important venues for human knowledge generation but confined to drinking from whatever resource puddles they can find on the ground. The issue here is not the quality of humanities research, which in research universities is as good as it has ever been in the history of the academy. Rather, the driving concern here is relevance of research, connecting universities more directly with ordinary people and the problems we face at every level from the bodily to the economic, from the existential to the civilizational. This driving concern for relevance is not merely a PR management strategy in an era when many people look askance both at universities and purported scientific authorities; nor is it solely a fund-raising technique – though it is surely both of these in part. More fundamentally, I see it as a deliberate attempt to disrupt the privileged isolation of university intellectuals by forcing them to confront real-world problems and show their value by solving them. Smart people have always been indispensable for problem solving within human cultures but it has rarely been as important as it now is for universities to demonstrate that the smart people they protect and support are also useful for addressing concerns outside of university subcultures.

The humanities disciplines may struggle to demonstrate the relevance of their research in ways that regular people can understand – most of us can't even explain our research to our families – but the situation in philosophy of religion is particularly dire. What is the philosophy-of-religion equivalent to the poet laureates in the United States, who exercise a profound influence on cultural awareness? Where are the best sellers in philosophy of religion to match Dan Dennett in philosophy, Steven Pinker in psychology, Scott Atran in anthropology, Germaine Greer in feminist theory, Cornell West in cultural theory, and Huston Smith in religious studies?

The practical transformation is the newest of the four under discussion in this essay. It is understandable that it is catching humanities scholars, including philosophers of religion, off guard. It is also to be expected that philosophers might be skittish about it, thinking that it might portend the abandonment of the fundamental tasks of philosophy. Yet PhilosophyOfReligion.org blogs do demonstrate that practical relevance is valued in two domains: helping university students learn to think (which is common territory with philosophy in general) and deepening the understanding of religious beliefs within religious communities (which is common

territory with theology). I am concerned that the drive for relevance doesn't go much further than that, and certainly not very deeply into the research activities of philosophers of religion. But shouldn't philosophers of religion be on the leading edge of interpreting religion – which is, after all, a global reality with both appealing and menacing aspects? Shouldn't they be the ones to help scientists and doctors who study aspects of religion do their work better? Shouldn't they cash out the practical value of learning to think globally and critically about the social construction of reality and its impact on people's worldviews and lifeways? And can't they do all that *as philosophers and humanities scholars*?

I think we should be doing all these things within philosophy of religion. But at present we don't seem close to knowing how to connect our work to the practical questions with which non-scholars need help, let alone to playing those roles in our societies.

2.6 Conclusion

How are philosophers of religion supposed to navigate four transformations simultaneously, each with its distinctive political profile and personal pressures? Are philosophers supposed to be omniscient?! It's a fair question. Maybe the answer seems so far from obvious that we sense there is no point in trying. But there are many sources of encouragement. After all, we are watching the rest of the university navigate these four transformations. We see it occurring even closer to home, within philosophy departments, in the shape of philosophers of science, global philosophy, empirical philosophy, applied philosophy, and their ilk. Understanding how these transformations are occurring in philosophy, and in the wider university, should shed light on what's required in philosophy of religion as well. We, too, can employ cross-training techniques, multidisciplinary research partnerships, and stakeholder engagement.

We are witnessing the vanishing of our field from the university. The low energy response is to conclude that it is all over for our field and to accept that it is time to impose what the tea leaves suggest is coming. But *what if we were to drink the tea*? What if we really did embrace the global transformation, the critical transformation, the multidisciplinary transformation, and the practical transformation? Just think about it. What might happen?

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Chapter 3

What Religious Studies Can Teach the Humanities: A Philosophical Perspective



Dan Arnold

Abstract Developing Tyler Roberts’s recognition that humanistic inquiry ineliminably involves irreducibly “first-personal” questions, this essay situates that idea with respect to debates in philosophy of mind – debates, in particular, about the irreducibly *normative* character of intentionality. It is further argued, in Kantian terms, that *freedom* consists in our being attuned to such normative considerations, and that our being so cannot coherently be explained away. In this way, one of Roberts’s central ideas – that as scholars of religion, we should “commit ourselves to asking what practical difference it makes to study people as if they were free” – is bolstered. The essay then asks whether this line of argument recommends any conclusions particularly regarding *religion*, or whether instead it amounts only to a case for the distinctiveness of generally humanistic inquiry. After considering Franklin Gamwell’s argument that “religion” does indeed represent an essential dimension of human being, the essay concludes by exploring more limited ways of conceiving the distinctiveness of religious studies among the fields of humanistic inquiry. It is suggested that whether or not an argument like Gamwell’s works, scholars in the fields of religious studies are uniquely positioned to identify the normative considerations that inexorably distinguish human activity as such. This suggestion is developed by considering recent scholarship on religion and constitutional law, with regard to which it is argued that such scholarship is cogent only insofar as it is informed by perspectives from religious studies – perspectives, in particular, that acknowledge the norm-laden character of all discourse.

Keywords Religious studies · Normativity · Philosophy of mind · Intentionality · Reasons

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3.1 Introduction: Towards a Return of Philosophy to Religious Studies

A look through issues of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* from the last few decades reveals a pronounced shift in the characteristic emphases of the fields of religious studies. Under the influence of scholars as diverse as Gregory Schopen (whose programmatic essay “Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism” encouraged scholarly attention not to the normative doctrinal texts of scholastic elites, but to material remains that supposedly reflect what Buddhists “actually did”) and Talal Asad (whose *Genealogies of Religion* influentially theorized the idea that “coercion [is] a condition for the realization of truth, and discipline essential to its maintenance”), scholars of religious studies have in recent decades been apt to eschew attention to matters of doctrine. Predominant these days is a focus instead on such things as embodied ritual practices, material remains, legitimating narratives, and other expressions of religious life that show the many and various phenomena of *being religious* to be vastly more complex than can be captured in terms of creedal propositions – when, that is, the focus is not, as it increasingly is in some corners of the field, on “hyperactive agent detection devices” and other evolved adaptations in neural networks.¹

While there is much to be commended in at least some of these generational shifts in scholarly attention, there is reason to think the pendulum has in some cases swung too far away from questions of doctrine and belief. Some recently emergent programs in religious studies are overreaching in their explanatory ambitions, courting incoherence by suggesting that virtually all human phenomena must admit of exhaustively *causal* explanations, and that what persons quaintly think of as their “reasons” for living this way or that are finally just epiphenomenal byproducts of psycho-social hegemony or neuro-cognitive modules or any number of other causal mechanisms. Among other things, overweening commitment to such reductionist explanations makes unintelligible the scholar’s own exercise of reason – a point that is not addressed by the characterization of the scholar’s reason alone as “scientific.”

It is a welcome development, then, that a number of important new books have challenged the social- and cognitive-scientistic predilections of many in the field, mounting a new case for the ineliminable significance of properly philosophical considerations relevant to the study of religions. I would single out, in this regard, Kevin Schilbrack’s *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto* (2014); Thomas A. Lewis’s *Why Philosophy Matters for the Study of Religion – and Vice*

¹ Schopen’s work is replete with claims to the effect that such-and-such a piece of material evidence reflects “the only actually attestable form of the actual – as opposed to the ideal – Buddhist doctrine of *karma*” (1997, 6–7). The passage from Asad (1993, 34) is characterizing a view he attributes to St. Augustine. (It should be noted that Asad is commendably careful about distinguishing this kind of *epistemic* point from questions of truth, *per se*.) The growth in literature on cognitive-scientific and bio-evolutionary studies in religion currently shows no signs of slowing, and examples are many; consider, e.g., Barrett 2010, Boyer 2001, Pyysiäinen 2009.

Versa (2016); and Tyler Roberts's *Encountering Religion: Responsibility and Criticism after Secularism* (2013). All published within the last few years, these books add a great deal to a case that I take to have been well launched by Terry Godlove's 2002 essay "Saving Belief: On the New Materialism in Religious Studies" – an essay that appropriately frames its critique of recent trends in religious studies (as I myself am wont to do) in terms of central debates in philosophy of mind. Godlove is, I think, exactly right to argue that *intentionally* describable events (events of thinking, reasoning, experiencing, uttering sentences, performing religious rites) cannot be understood as the kinds of things they are without some reference to "intentional" terms – without understanding them, that is, as at least implicitly involving not only causes but also *reasons*, and as thus taken by their subjects to have at least some implicit meaning or significance.²

Of Catherine Bell's behavioristic approach to ritual studies, for example, Godlove writes: "I do not see how – except by taking the agent herself to be taking herself to be pursuing religious ends – to situate her movements in a specifically religious context, and so to see her movements as religious" (2002, 22). This is precisely parallel to a point to be made more generally about such constitutively intentional phenomena as using a language: while it picks out something significant to say, of someone who is speaking, that she is producing acoustic disturbances by means of the controlled use of physiological vocal apparatus, we cannot understand her *as* uttering a sentence unless we also and already have the idea of her *as meaning* something – an idea that is irreducible to the other kind of description. To Godlove's line of thought, the recent works of Schilbrack, Lewis, and Roberts variously add a wealth of historical and philosophical insight regarding the emergence and character of religious studies as a field; the influential preconceptions and agendas of significant philosophers and theologians; and sophisticated engagement with a wide range of projects in contemporary religious studies.

Godlove's association of specifically *religious* phenomena with the encompassing category of intentional phenomena suggests, however, some challenging questions for the conception of religious studies as a field: Is there anything distinctive about *religious* phenomena that necessitates attention to normative considerations, or does Godlove's point have equally to do with any and all peculiarly human phenomena? Does the point, in other words, apply to pretty much every instance of human meaning-making activity, or is there something distinctive about characteristically religious kinds of meaning? If there is nothing to be said for there being distinctively religious ways in which humans are meaning-making or -seeking creatures, does that count against the conception of religious studies as a field? And does the integrity of the field await answers to such questions?

The same line of questions is also relevant, I think, to engagement with Tyler Roberts's *Encountering Religion*, on which I want to focus here; for while Roberts's book represents, in my estimation, a splendidly cogent (and even eloquent) critique

²For an elaboration of my understanding of the relation between *intentionality* (in the philosophically technical sense of that word) and the normative character of reasons, see Arnold 2012, 81–115 (*et passim*).

of certain recently influential programs in religious studies, it often looks as though his constructive proposal finally argues only for the necessity of irreducibly humanistic studies. Does it matter that it specifically be *religion* that is “encountered” in the ways Roberts suggests, or might we without any loss take him to recommend something about humanistic studies more generally? It is not, I think, finally clear what Roberts’s book suggests about how to answer this, and it is therefore worth thinking along with his book about whether there is anything distinctive about religious studies among the fields of humanistic inquiry.

In what follows, then, I would like first to foreground one important aspect of Roberts’s important book – to show, in particular, the extent to which his *Encountering Religion* essentially involves the kind of argument Godlove and others have made specifically in terms of philosophy of mind. Roberts rightly recognizes the line of argument I have in mind as centering on *freedom*, in just the sense that is basic for Kant; in these terms, Roberts suggests that it is important for scholars of religious studies to “commit ourselves to asking what practical difference it makes to study people ... as if they were free” (2013, 94). I want to emphasize, however, that there is a philosophical case to be made for the stronger point that we not only *should* commit ourselves to this, but that we inescapably *are* so committed simply insofar as we are striving for understanding – a kind of striving that necessarily presupposes the idea of *truth*.

I also want, though, to entertain the idea that among the many and various subjects of humanistic inquiry, there *is* something distinctive about religion (or about religious studies) that makes especially clear that normative considerations are ineliminable. One way to get at this is with reference to my own institution, the University of Chicago Divinity School. Perhaps uniquely among North American institutions denominated “divinity school,” the University of Chicago’s deliberately comprises both ministerial education, and something like the full range of scholarly projects currently pursued by exemplars of the academic study of religion. (This is in contrast to such settings as, for example, Harvard and Yale Universities, which both have outstanding divinity schools, but where doctoral education in religious studies is pursued not in these but in their respective humanities divisions.) While it is, no doubt, owing largely to historical accidents that the University of Chicago Divinity School has ended up so configured, it is interesting to consider Chicago’s situation as though it reflects a principled commitment to the importance (indeed, the necessity) of pursuing all kinds of engagement with religious phenomena under the same institutional umbrella – the necessity, that is, of keeping always in view the fact that *lived religion* stands to be impacted by the scholarly study of religion, and that the scholarly study of religion ought in principle to be vulnerable to critique *from religious perspectives*. There is, this institutional configuration suggests, something distinctive about religious studies among fields of humanistic inquiry.

I further want to entertain, as one way of arguing for this idea, Franklin Gamwell’s proposed conception of the “comparative philosophy of religion,” which represents a peculiarly strong argument for religion as a necessarily basic category. Gamwell would have us recognize, indeed, that transcendental conditions of the intelligibility of all human inquiry entail that there is a *religious* way of being that represents a

veritable natural kind – that, in other words, human understanding per se necessarily implies self-differentiating forms of human activity that are essentially “religious.” While there is something to be said for Gamwell’s argument, I am reluctant to go that far. I want to conclude, then, by considering whether only a transcendental argument such as Gamwell’s will suffice, or whether instead there might be other ways to argue either for a distinctively religious kind of meaning-making, or for something distinctive about the field of religious studies as a site for the recognition of the ineliminably normative character of humanistic inquiry. Might philosophical considerations point the way towards recognizing that the fields of religious studies distinctively hold important lessons regarding the nature of the humanities?

Let us begin, though, by bringing some of the relevant philosophical considerations into view – something that can be done by developing the points in philosophy of mind that figure importantly in Tyler Roberts’s *Encountering Religion*.

3.2 Tyler Roberts against the “New Locativists”

Tyler Roberts’s *Encountering Religion* advances, among other things, a cogent immanent critique of such influential scholars of religious studies as Russell McCutcheon and Bruce Lincoln. The immanent character of the critique is evident in Roberts’s exploitation of some insights from Jonathan Z. Smith, whom McCutcheon and Lincoln commonly commend as well exemplifying something like the same program they take themselves to advance. Roberts draws, in this regard, on Smith’s influential idea that religions variously exemplify “locative” aspirations (which have to do with the formation and maintenance of identities through the drawing of boundaries), and “utopian” ones (which have to do with claims of universal significance). Having in mind that scholars like Lincoln particularly focus on the former dimension of religions as vulnerable to critique, Roberts says in this regard that “locative maps cannot really acknowledge disjunction; they ward it off by focusing on the celebration and re-creation of the original order of the cosmos. Put bluntly, religious people guided by locative maps do not really ‘think’” – a point Jonathan Z. Smith expresses, in a phrase quoted by Roberts, as denying “the significance of efforts at thought and of intellectual criticism” (2013, 32).³ When Roberts characterizes Lincoln, et al., as themselves exemplifying an essentially *locative* sort of orientation, then, he is charging them with exemplifying the very stance they take to be most pernicious particularly about religious thought.

³The phrase “the significance of efforts at thought and of intellectual criticism” is quoted from Smith 2004, 17. Smith emphasizes, with regard to *locative* and *utopian* views, that these do not respectively correspond to “archaic” (or “primitive”) and “modern”; rather, “[b]oth have been and remain coeval existential possibilities which may be appropriated whenever and wherever they correspond to man’s experience of his world. While in this culture, at this time or in that place, one or the other view may appear the more dominant, this does not effect the postulation of the basic availability of both at any time, in any place.” (Smith 1993, 101)

The sense in which these critical scholars of religion themselves count as “new locativists,” Roberts says, is that they “locate themselves securely in the academy and locate the academy securely in the contemporary world by opposing their ‘thinking’ to religion” (2013, 38). These scholars exhibit great confidence, that is, in *locating* “religion” and “scholarship” in essentially different intellectual spaces, and they are centrally concerned to monitor the boundaries between these. This orientation is, moreover, finally warranted only by a move such as Lincoln himself would characterize as quintessentially “religious.” Thus, while he gives much critical attention to the authorizing uses of narrative, Lincoln himself typically falls back on a narrative when pressed to justify the perspective from which he critiques religious ideologies. In particular, Roberts rightly stresses, Lincoln “takes a normative position but supports it not by the kind of reasoned argument he champions, but rather by the familiar, one might argue tired, narrative of modernity and Enlightenment that has maintained a comfortable hegemony among Western intellectuals for more than two centuries” (2013, 77). Roberts thus shows that Lincoln himself finally does no better than to support his claims for the privileged status of scholarly reason by appeal to a *myth* – that of the age of Enlightenment as having irreversibly thrown off the shackles of benighted traditions. Exposing the shortcomings of this story, Roberts proposes that we “give up the founding myth of modernity that opposed critical reason to the blind faith of religion and tradition. This would be to recognize a complicated connection between critical reason’s vigilance and the ‘trust’ that comes with faith” (2013, 152).

Roberts can, moreover, himself enlist Jonathan Z. Smith in recommending this turn away from the various kinds of reductionism characteristic of these “new locativists.” Following Smith, Roberts thus ventures that scholars in religious studies are above all striving for what Smith refers to as *intelligibility* – and intelligibility, as Roberts aptly says, “allows for possibilities of explanation or understanding beyond simply reducing religion to ‘fundamental’ or ‘real’ causes” (2013, 66). In particular, Smith models the kind of intelligibility he seeks on *translation*; for any exercise in translation epitomizes the fact that “knowledge is not produced in the repetitions of description or in the slight alterations of paraphrase, but through the encounter with difference and discrepancy, and even distortion, that necessarily comes with translation” (2013). Any achievement of *intelligibility*, in other words, necessarily consists in something more than the mere reproduction of data; any such achievement also necessarily involves, rather, some sort of *reasoned appropriation*, whether that be characterized as (e.g.) *interpretation*, *understanding*, or *critique*.

Insofar as he thus opposes the quest for this kind of intelligibility especially to scholarly programs that aim always and only for exhaustively causal explanations, Roberts is right to see that central issues in philosophy of mind, ethics, and metaphysics come into play – in particular, the many issues that can be focused in terms of the philosophical distinction between *causes* and *reasons*. According to the reductionist approaches Roberts is here targeting, “human behavior is an ‘artifact’ of social and historical forces.” These approaches focus, he says, “not on the human ‘subject’ but on the social ‘mechanisms’ by which meaning, value, and action are established, authorized, and maintained.” It is particularly against this that Roberts

frames properly *humanistic* study, which he characterizes in terms with far-reaching philosophical implications. In contrast, then, to the characteristically reductionist focus only on causation,

humanistic study engages such issues in terms of what the philosopher Robert Pippin [*sic*] calls “irreducibly ‘first-personal’ questions.” By this, Pippin means that when we seek to understand human life, third-person explanations only take us so far because they do not offer a full account of social practices of “giving and demanding reasons for what we do.” Human subjects make decisions and act based, at least in part, on such reasons. All the knowledge in the world about my historical context, psychological profile, or genetic makeup cannot make decisions for me.⁴

There is much to be said about the ideas Roberts here introduces. The point he makes following Pippin is, as I would put it, that no explanation of any human activity can explain away the responsiveness to reasons that is necessarily presupposed thereby – and the fact that persons are “responsive to reasons” amounts to a gloss (one favored by John McDowell) of what Kant took human *freedom* to consist in.⁵ The fact that we are *free*, that is, consists in the distinctively human capacity to step back from the immediate perceptual present and ask, of any action or decision that has been or might be undertaken, whether it is as one *ought* to have done or to do. As Pippin says in elaborating on what he means by “irreducibly first-personal,” “whenever anyone faces a normative question (which is the stance from which normative issues are issues), no third-personal fact – why one as a matter of fact has come to prefer this or that, for example – can be relevant to what I must decide, unless I count it as a relevant *practical* reason in the justification of what I decide ought to be done or believed” (2009, 38). In other words, “normative questions” are those that demand to be answered with reference to *reasons* rather than causal explanations – and the intelligibility of questions about what one *ought* to do can never be explained by (or otherwise reduced to) any account of what one does in fact do.

The *freedom* that consists in our responsiveness to reasons is most basically evident simply in the fact that persons recognize demands for justification; when we are asked to *justify* any action or decision, we generally understand what is asked of us – we understand, that is, that what is demanded is not a causal explanation (“I did it because events in my central nervous system caused certain movements of my body”), but rather, *reasons* for thinking it right (or wrong) for having done as we did or as we aim to do. As philosopher John McDowell is apt to put the point, *justification* is to be distinguished from “exculpation”; for whereas the former involves “relations such as one thing’s being warranted or correct in the light of another” (1996, xv), causal explanations instead have the effect of relieving us of responsibility for whatever is in question. Simply insofar, then, as we find it so much as intelligible that we can thus be asked to justify ourselves, we are experiencing ourselves

⁴This and the preceding quotations in this paragraph are all from Roberts, 2013, 90; in the last passage, Roberts quotes Pippin (2009, 38), whose name is correctly spelled with two *i*’s and no *e*.

⁵I am much influenced, in my understanding of Kant, by the work of John McDowell; for a sustained reading of his philosophical project, see Arnold 2012, 94–108 (*et passim*).

as *free*; this is what it means for Roberts to say (we saw above) that “all the knowledge in the world” about the many and various causal constraints on my activity “cannot make decisions for me.” Over and above all causal considerations, there are always the logically distinct questions of how one *takes* oneself to have acted, and of whether that is as one *ought* to have done – questions essentially irreducible to (say) questions of psychological or neurophysiological disposition. As long as such additional questions remain so much as intelligible, it can be said that we have in view a distinctively *human* phenomenon, which can, as such, be described in terms of freedom.

Given the Kantian provenance of the idea of *freedom* here invoked, it should be noted that it remained, for Kant, an intractable question just how we are to reconcile the description of human persons as free in this way with also plausible descriptions of persons as consisting in material bodies subject to (among other things) the laws of physics. Kant could only conclude, in this regard, that it is at least *coherently thinkable* that there is – as he put it in an unfortunate phrase that attests to the extent of his own enduring thrall to certain conceptions of causation – “causation through freedom.” We cannot, he supposed, ever explain just how it is that, say, having a belief or a reason could, among other things, cause various movements of the body and so forth; we must be content, he concluded in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, with the fact that there is no contradiction entailed in nevertheless thinking ourselves free.

Kant did have, though, a stronger argument for thinking that the limits of our understanding of this cannot coherently be taken to count against the fact of freedom. In continuing the passage from which I quoted above, Roberts suggests precisely the argument I have in mind. Having said that “all the knowledge in the world about my historical context, psychological profile, or genetic makeup cannot make decisions for me,” Roberts then allows that “[t]his is not to say that there isn’t a lot to learn about human behavior by studying genes or ideology.” Roberts emphasizes that the point, rather, is this:

explanations based on such work do not render irrelevant the reasons people use to explain or justify their behavior to themselves or to those with whom they are engaged in social relations. Nor do they answer all questions about how those reasons, and the sensibilities and dispositions that are bound up with them, move people to do what they do (2013, 90).

Regardless, then, of how or whether they can figure in causal explanations of behavior, *reasons* always remain in play as representing an irreducibly distinct kind of description, at least in the sense that however cogent and complete the causal explanation on offer, the other kind of question (the demand for reasons) remains intelligible. The description of persons as responsive to reasons cannot, to that extent, be obviated by any psycho-social or neuro-physiological account, no matter how sophisticated. And the argument that Kant adds to the unsatisfying conclusion of the first *Critique* is one to the effect that this fact cannot coherently be denied.

3.3 Excursus: Practical Reason and the First-Person Perspective

We can bring Kant's stronger argument into view by first considering one proposal for a causal account, from an essentially third-person perspective, of the phenomenon of *intentionality*, which arguably represents the overarching category that comprises responsiveness to reasons (See Arnold 2012, 81–115). Consider, in particular, Daniel Dennett's idea of "the intentional stance." Attributing the intentional stance to (*nota bene*) an object, Dennett says, consists in "treating the object whose behavior you want to predict as a rational agent with beliefs and desires and other mental stages exhibiting what Brentano and others call *intentionality*" (1987, 15). In particular, we invoke "intentional stance" descriptions whenever we usefully treat some object or creature *as though* it entertained the kinds of discursive thoughts in terms of which its patterned behaviors are reasonably thought of as purposeful. The locution "as though" should not be taken to suggest that Dennett denies the reality of the patterns that come into view by attributing the intentional stance; indeed, it is among Dennett's points to stress that "intentional stance description yields an objective, real pattern in the world" (1987, 34). If we imagine, for example, extraterrestrial observers describing some highly complex, rational human behaviors – those, for example, that constitute the commerce of a stock exchange – as consisting in nothing more than interactions among fathomlessly many subatomic particles, we would be right to judge them as having "failed to see a real pattern in the world they are observing" (1987, 26). Dennett proposes, then, that his approach is a way to be a realist about intentional phenomena.

Nevertheless, it is chief among Dennett's points to urge that intentional characterizations do not require that we invoke the kinds of abstractions that necessarily figure in the semantic *content* of intentional states – do not require, that is, that there *be* any "reasons" to which anyone is really responsive. With respect, for example, to the operations of a computer that is "playing" chess, Dennett says that "doubts about whether the chess-playing computer *really* has beliefs and desires are misplaced; for the definition of intentional systems I have given does not say that intentional systems *really* have beliefs and desires, but that one can explain and predict their behavior by *ascribing* beliefs and desires to them." Precisely how one imagines what is thus ascribed, he says, "makes no difference to the nature of the calculation one makes on the basis of the ascriptions" (1981, 7). The claim, then, is that "*all there is* to being a true believer is being a system whose behavior is reliably predictable via the intentional strategy, and hence *all there is* to really and truly believing that *p* (for any proposition *p*) is being an intentional system for which *p* occurs as a belief in the best (most predictive) interpretation" (1987, 29).

Central to this proposal, I think, is the idea that intentionality can thus be described from a third-person perspective; this is the real point in understanding the intentional stance as usefully *attributed* to any of the various objects whose behaviors might usefully be predicted in terms thereof. *Being rational*, Dennett thus says, "is being intentional[,], is being the *object* of a certain stance" (1981, 271; emphasis

mine). By thus characterizing intentionality, Dennett aims to avoid invoking anything that will not admit of scientific explanation; “whenever we stop in our explanations at the intentional level we have left over an unexplained instance of intelligence or rationality” (1981, 12). Reference, in any account of a person’s intentionally describable actions, to *the content of her beliefs* – to, e.g., her *reasons* – is problematic, then, just insofar as “rationality is being taken for granted, and in this way shows us where a theory is incomplete” (1981). Reference to the content of a subject’s beliefs does not, that is, explain anything; indeed, it represents precisely the point where, for Dennett, explanation is called for. The idea that a proper explanation must then be essentially “third-personal” reflects Dennett’s confidence that what is at issue is a finally empirical matter such as will admit only of a properly scientific answer; his idea of “intentional systems” is invoked, he thus says, as “a bridge connecting the intentional domain (which includes our ‘common-sense’ world of persons and actions, game theory, and the ‘neural signals’ of the biologist) to the non-intentional domain of the physical sciences” (1981, 22).

Significantly, though, Dennett allows that nothing can *be* an “an intentional system” except “in relation to the strategies of *someone* who is trying to explain and predict its behavior” (1981, 3–4; emphasis mine). It’s revealing to ask, in this regard, *for whom* any system might thus be the object of the “stance” in question; if “being intentional” consists in “being the object of a certain stance,” what does that presuppose about the *subject* who is attributing that stance? What is the person for whom some system is an “object” of the intentional stance *doing* in attributing that stance? What I am emphasizing is that *attributing the intentional stance to anything* is itself an *intentional* phenomenon par excellence – the phenomenon, in particular, of regarding any object or creature as though it were acting *as I act when I act purposefully*. But the intentional stance idea does not, to that extent, explain anything at all about intentionality; for we understand what it means to attribute this stance to anything only insofar as we already have a first-personal experience of what it is to act intentionally. Insofar, then, as this proposal is itself intelligible only with reference to our own experienced intentionality, Dennett’s idea gives no help in explaining the very phenomenon we supposedly want to understand.

Dennett almost acknowledges as much when he notes an asymmetry that is crucial to his thought experiment about alternative descriptions of the workings of a stock market: namely, “*the unavoidability of the intentional stance with regard to oneself and one’s fellow intelligent beings*” (1987, 27). I do not see, however, that Dennett fully allows the significance of this concession. What this unavoidability brings into view is the extent to which intentionality may not, in principle, *be* exhaustively describable with reference only to a third-person perspective. There is, as G. F. Schueler has put the point I’m after, “a ‘non-theoretical’ element at the heart of reasons explanations, namely the way I understand my own case when I act for a reason” (2003, 160). The “furthest down” one can go, that is, in characterizing the kind of constitutively intentional action that will admit of demands for justification, is to understand it in terms of *what I am doing when I experience myself as acting for a reason*. As Schueler puts it, “my explanations of the actions of others in terms of their reasons have as their essential explanatory element that I regard them as

doing as I do when I act. That is the central, and essential, explanatory mechanism of such explanations. If this is correct, then clearly it makes sense of the idea that the first person case is prior” (2003). Dennett’s whole proposal is intelligible only insofar as we already have that idea, which we therefore cannot take to be explained by his proposal.

This brings us, finally, to what I have said is Kant’s stronger argument for the conclusion that however difficult we find it to make sense of the idea, we inexorably *do* experience ourselves as responsive to reasons – which just is to say that we inexorably experience ourselves as *free*. What Kant adds to the conclusion he allows himself in the *Critique of Pure Reason* – adds, that is, to the conclusion that even though we may not understand how it works, we can think without contradiction that we are free – is the central argument of the *Critique of Practical Reason*. The chief task of this work is simply to argue that reason is “practical,” where that means simply that reason is (as Kant puts it) among the “determining grounds of the will.” Kant’s reference to “determining grounds” of the will has the unfortunate effect of suggesting – like his characterization of responsiveness to reasons as “causation through freedom” – that what is under consideration is still a kind of *causation*. I would instead say, then, that the point he chiefly aims to make in the second *Critique* is just that any complete account of human persons necessarily includes some reference to them as responsive to reasons.

The main argument in this regard is deceptively simple: Anyone who would *deny* that reason is “practical” in this sense – who would argue, that is, that our responsiveness to reasons can finally be shown to be an epiphenomenal byproduct of our neuro-evolutionary history (or in any other way explained away)⁶ – can make sense of anyone (even herself) as entertaining the truth of her proposal only by *arguing* for it. But that means, of course, that it is only *by reasoning* that one could show that reason is not really practical. Our responsiveness to reasons is necessarily exhibited, then, even by anyone who would deny its reality – which is why it cannot coherently be denied that reasoning has an ineliminable role to play in human behavior. As Kant puts the point, “if as pure reason it is really practical, it proves its reality and that of its concepts by what it does, and all subtle reasoning against the possibility of its being practical is futile” (1788, 3).

What the argument from practical reason develops, then, is a cogent claim to the effect that we not only *can* conceive of reason’s really having a place in understanding what we are like, but also that we inexorably *do* – a fact that is evident even in any act of arguing to the contrary. This is why it makes sense for Kant to conclude that while “speculative reason” could put forward the idea of freedom “only problematically, as not impossible to think, without assuring it objective reality” (1788, 3), it can now be appreciated that “practical reason of itself, without any collusion with speculative reason,” gives more reality to the idea of freedom than is given by the arguments of the first *Critique*; practical reason establishes “by means of a fact

⁶The foregoing proposal from Dennett represents, then, one way of arguing against the thought that reason really is “practical”; for the point of the “intentional stance” idea is precisely to make sense of purposeful behavior without supposing that anyone really “has” reasons for such.

what could there only be *thought*" (1788, 5). Expressing the point that our own first-personal acquaintance with this fact is fundamentally basic for this, Kant adds that "morality first discloses to us the concept of freedom"; it is, he says, "*practical reason* which first poses to speculative reason" the possibility of our freedom, practical reason that has "come in and forced this concept upon us" (1788, 27). We do not, in other words, in the first instance have the idea of freedom because theoretical reason shows its possibility; indeed, the idea that we are free emerges as eminently *problematic* from the perspective of theoretical reason. Rather, "freedom" veritably consists simply in the fact that we always already find ourselves responsive to reasons – a fact that is itself presupposed by any other reasoned inquiry we can undertake.

Notwithstanding, then, the intractable difficulties in understanding how it works, we inexorably discover our responsiveness to reasons as such – discover, that is, that we are free – whenever we find that we understand what we are being asked when we are called on to justify anything we have done or claimed. Elizabeth Anscombe makes much the same point with respect to the idea of acting *intentionally* – an idea, she says, that "would not exist if our question 'Why?' did not. It is not that certain things, namely the movements of humans, are for some undiscovered reason subject to the question 'Why?' " Rather, she elaborates, "the description of something as a human action could not occur prior to the existence of the question 'Why?', simply as a kind of utterance by which we were *then* obscurely prompted to address the question" (2000, 83). That is just what it means for Kant to say that "the moral law thus determines that which speculative philosophy had to leave undetermined" (1788, 42). That is (to demystify Kant's highfalutin reference to the "moral law"), the inexorable fact of our responsiveness to reasons as such means that regardless of what it seems our best theories recommend in this regard, if there is any conflict between our best theories and what it is that we manifestly *do* in entertaining (thinking about, arguing for, knowing the truth of) them, it is the latter – the incontrovertibly manifest fact that reason is "practical" – to which we must defer.⁷

If our theoretical reasoning seems to make that problematic – if, e.g., a theoretical perspective we're entertaining recommends the conclusion that we are *not* "really" responsive to reasons, and that some causal explanation can account for everything about the illusion that we are – the conflict should be taken to count *against that theory*. It cannot coherently be thought that theoretical reason is to be privileged over practical reason, just insofar as it can only be *by practically engaging in reasoning* that any of the theoretical options could in the first place constitute

⁷Kant says as much when he emphasizes that the *theoretical* reason that shows freedom to be problematic is itself but a development of the same responsiveness to reasons that we already exhibit when we so much as understand anyone's demand that we justify something we have claimed or done: "...if pure reason of itself can be and really is practical, as the consciousness of the moral law proves it to be, it is still only one and the same reason which, whether from a theoretical or a practical perspective, judges according to a priori principles... in the union of pure speculative with pure practical reason in one cognition, the latter has primacy... one cannot require pure practical reason to be subordinate to speculative reason and so reverse the order, since all interest is ultimately practical and even that of speculative reason is only conditional and is complete in practical use alone." (1788, 101–02)

the content of our claims. Indeed, our first-personal experience of ourselves as free – our own understanding of what is asked of us when someone asks *why* we have done or said as we have – is irreducibly basic for any further application of reasoning; it is *because* we are “free” in this sense that it is so much as possible for us to extend reason in ways such as can show (among innumerable other things) that freedom is problematic. It is, then, only because we first-personally experience ourselves as responsive to reasons that it is possible for persons to argue for – indeed, to *understand* – any reasoned claims at all.

3.4 Practical Reason and Humanistic Inquiry

The foregoing represents, I think, precisely the line of thought that’s suggested when Roberts allows that as scholars of religion, we should “commit ourselves to asking what practical difference it makes to study people ... *as if* they were free” (2013, 94; emphasis added). While the qualification here – “as if” – might suggest that we’re being asked to indulge in willful self-deception, Kant’s thought that practical reason establishes freedom “by means of a fact” is consistent with Roberts’s apt recognition that “freedom and creativity are not the kinds of things that can be fully theorized or explained” (2013). He elaborates that “to invoke freedom is not really to explain something – an action or an idea – but to say that explanation has run its course, that something new has happened” (2013). To invoke freedom, as I would put it, is just to say that a logically and irreducibly distinct kind of description is in play – a description that cannot be *explained* insofar as any explanation would itself be intelligible only insofar as we already know, first-personally, precisely what we would in that case be trying to explain (namely, what it is to be responsive to reasons). The point is not, then, that appeal to human responsiveness to reasons amounts to a mystification – that it amounts, e.g., to a “protective strategy” of the sort that Wayne Proudfoot (1985) influentially critiqued. The point, rather, is just that reference to distinctively human phenomena necessarily brings into play the kind of “irreducibly first-personal” questions noted by Pippin – questions that are not only no less real for their being irreducible, but that are themselves among the conditions of the intelligibility of any use of reason at all.

Roberts is right to conclude from such considerations that “there is no reason to privilege” any sort of deterministic metaphysics in scholarly discourse, and that “there are many reasons to make room for the metaphysical and moral commitment to freedom” (2013, 94). Indeed, I have followed Kant in arguing not only that there is no reason to privilege scientific explanations, but that we cannot coherently do so – and that among the many reasons for instead making room for “the metaphysical and moral commitment to freedom” is that we inexorably *exhibit* freedom whenever we try to understand anything at all. What finally distinguishes humanistic inquiry, Roberts can thus aptly conclude, is that while naturalistic explanations treat “intentions and purposes as epiphenomena to be explained in terms of social processes or deep psychological structures of which human subjects are largely unaware,” the humanistic study of human behavior instead “puts intentional ideas and actions of human agents at the center of inquiry” (2013, 90). What it means,

then, for scholars of religious studies to study religious people “as if they were free” is to consider religious *reasons* as necessarily part of any complete account of the phenomena in view.

To do so is not, to be sure, to commit oneself *a priori* to holding that all religious phenomena are rational or justified (many religious phenomena, no doubt, are not); it is just to commit oneself to recognizing that whatever the promise and value of any number of causal-explanatory projects (whether those be in terms of psycho-social hegemony or bio-evolutionary adaptations or whatever), none of these can coherently be thought to exhaust such phenomena. With the foregoing excursus on a Kantian line of argument that can be invoked against a causal account such as Daniel Dennett’s third-personal take on intentionality, I mean to have shown, *pace* Roberts, not just that we should commit ourselves to this, but that we inexorably do so commit ourselves simply insofar as we are striving for understanding.

The stance I have commended amounts, no doubt, to a variation on the familiar thought that the human sciences constitutively involve what Dilthey called *Verstehen*, and that the human sciences to that extent essentially involve both explanation and (what is logically distinct) *understanding*. I hope, however, that the foregoing adds to that familiar idea the recognition (*pace* some contemporary discussions in philosophy of mind) that Dilthey’s distinction implicates profound and basic points in philosophy of mind – the recognition, in particular, that the *intentionality* that essentially characterizes human behavior ineliminably involves reference to a first-person perspective (to anyone’s own experience of what it is to be responsive to reasons). To that extent, as I also hope to have shown, the cost of commitment to any theory or explanation that aims to eliminate basically *intentional* considerations is incoherence. Among the things to be gained by recognizing as much, I think, is that humanistic inquiry, in the sense I have here tried to elaborate, is necessarily presupposed *by any other kind of inquiry*; for one’s own experience of what it is to act for a reason (or of what it is to *mean* something) is a condition of the possibility of understanding, as such.

3.5 Does Being *human* Necessarily Imply Being *religious*?

We have, though, so far considered Tyler Roberts’s *Encountering Religion* only as commending the distinctiveness of humanistic inquiry. Does it make any difference that Roberts is particularly concerned with encountering *religion*? Or does the foregoing amount simply to a case for the necessarily normative character of engagement with any and all distinctively human behaviors and artifacts? There are various ways in which one might try to make a case that there is something distinctive about *religious* ways of being human (or about *religions* among the various expressions of human meaning-making). A peculiarly strong case for such a conclusion has been ventured by Franklin Gamwell, who begins a 1994 volume of essays – one in a SUNY Press series (“Toward a Comparative Philosophy of Religions”) that is itself an expression of the University of Chicago Divinity School’s conception and establishment of a doctoral program in philosophy of *religions* (note the plural) – with an ambitious “Forward to Comparative Philosophy of Religion.” According to

Gamwell's proposal, "Comparative philosophy of religion may be identified as interreligious dialogue that has become critical reflection" (1994, 21).

To develop that claim, Gamwell finds it necessary first to defend a specifically *philosophical* definition of religion – a definition, that is, that is not tailored to the empirical description of any particular sociological or historical phenomena, but that is, rather, normatively concerned to individuate something that *ought* to be understood with regard to human being. The fact that few religious studies scholars agree on the range of empirical phenomena properly brought under the category *religion* – the fact, indeed, that the field of religious studies as a whole seems largely to have given up on the project of definitively identifying a natural kind worth the name "religion" – therefore does not count against what Gamwell has in mind; for "the conclusion that religion cannot be philosophically defined is itself a philosophical claim." This means, Gamwell explains, that "[t]o say that an understanding of religious activity is *not* included in or implied by the most general understandings of human activity that are valid is itself to assert a most general understanding of human activity, so that this is a claim subject to philosophical assessment" (1994, 23; emphasis added). If, in other words, one holds that human being is such that it does not involve any essentially "religious" activity, one is effectively making a general claim about *human being as such* – and whatever consensus there may be in the field of religious studies with regard to the pitfalls in defining the type *religion*, that consensus has surely not been achieved by the kind of philosophical case necessary to warrant any conclusions about human being as such.

Elaborating his philosophical definition of "religion," Gamwell advances a transcendental argument to the effect that human life as such necessarily implies or presupposes a sphere of activity that can be individuated as distinctively *religious*. He approaches this point by raising a more basic question – the question of "whether a general definition of human activity includes or implies certain distinctions among its specific forms or aspects, that is, whether human activity as such is self-differentiating." If human activity as such implies or entails distinct spheres thereof, then it can make sense to ask "whether one of its forms or aspects can be defended as an appropriate referent of 'religious'" (1994, 24). Here, Gamwell takes it as uncontroversial to say in the first place that "human existence is distinguished by self-reflection or self-understanding" (1994). In the idiom I have favored, this is in effect to say that human existence is distinguished by *responsiveness to reasons*; indeed, Gamwell proceeds to make good on this initial claim by making an argument precisely like the broadly Kantian argument I have rehearsed in connection with Roberts.⁸

⁸Here, interspersed with my own brief glosses, is what the argument looks like when Gamwell makes it (with the following all from 1994, 26): "Granting that understanding of self, others, and some larger reality occurs, some may still contest the claim that this understanding *constitutes* such activity." That is, some may deny that reason really is "practical," and argue instead that the appearance that it is can be given an alternative explanation; as Gamwell puts this point, "Some modes of thought attempt to treat understanding as an 'epiphenomenon,' such that no mention of or reference to it is required in order to identify any given activity, and human science may proceed 'objectively' or in a manner that seeks causal relationships similar to those pursued by the sciences of nonhuman existence." Like Kant, Gamwell responds by arguing that this is self-referentially inco-

Given, then, that human being constitutively involves self-understanding, human activity “also includes an understanding, at least in some measure, of some larger reality of which the self and others are parts”; for “the self includes its relations to others, at least insofar as the others are understood.” (1994, 25) (Significantly, not all such understanding is necessarily explicit; it is precisely the point of some human activities to reflect on what is merely implicit in this or that human practice or activity.) Gamwell then adds that constitutively moral considerations inexorably figure in any such self-understanding; “our choices are always moral choices because every particular self-understanding includes, at least implicitly, a comprehensive self-understanding” (1994, 31). This further implies, he says, that “valid comprehensive self-understanding is the comprehensive moral norm” (1994, 32). That is, it makes sense to ask whether any particular act or decision is as one *ought* to have undertaken only insofar as one finally has some criteria of assessment. While many particular acts or decisions may usefully be assessed in terms (e.g.) of whether or not they advance our various aims, that is no use in judging whether *these are the aims we ought to be pursuing*; all local norms, on Gamwell’s view, thus imply some comprehensive norm.

That we are at least implicitly committed to some comprehensive norm is then the reason why human being as such implies some practice worth the name *philosophy*. Here, it matters that (as noted above) not all self-understanding is *explicit*: “Because explicit understanding is always fragmentary, such forms may be distinguished in terms of the differences between their explicit understandings” (1994, 36). *Philosophy*, then, is the self-differentiating kind of human practice that is constitutively concerned to render explicit some answer to the question Gamwell takes to be implied by self-understanding, as such: “What is the valid comprehensive self-understanding?” (1994, 37). The intelligibility of some critical reflection on this question, he thus argues, is implied by the self-understanding that essentially characterizes human being – and that critical reflection is what is meant by “philosophy.”

This recognition further implies, Gamwell concludes, a distinctively *religious* kind of human activity; for while philosophy consists in essentially *critical* reflection on the question of valid self-understanding, human activity necessarily involves, as well, what he calls *decisive* reflection on the same, since it is in the nature of human existence to compel *some* finally decisive expressions of self-understanding. As Heidegger emphasizes with reference to our finding ourselves “thrown” into the

herent: “But to treat self-understanding as an epiphenomenon is in truth to deny that it occurs, because an activity that understands itself must in some measure thereby determine itself.” Self-understanding constitutively involves, as Kant would put it, some measure of *freedom*, which Gamwell unpacks thus: “Self-understanding, in other words, necessarily transcends other-determination, and, therefore, an activity in which self-understanding occurs is in some measure a product of self-determination or is constituted by that understanding... [Regardless of how much ‘other-determination’ may figure in any case of this,] it remains that the completion of a human activity waits on how it chooses to understand itself.” This, I think, is just as Roberts meant in saying, in a passage quoted above, that “all the knowledge in the world about my historical context, psychological profile, or genetic make-up cannot make decisions for me.”

world, we have no choice but to act, and every moment therefore confronts us with decisions such as cannot await the completion of exhaustive critical reflection. On Gamwell's account, then, "activity is religious insofar as it asks and answers explicitly and *decisively* the question of human authenticity as such"; *religion*, to that extent, can be philosophically defined as "the primary form of culture in terms of which the comprehensive question is explicitly asked and answered" (1994, 38).

So, because human beings exist with (some degree of) self-understanding – because, as I have put it, they are responsive to reasons – human being as such implies the question of which comprehensive self-understanding is true or authentic; critical reflection on this is the self-differentiating activity of *philosophy*. And because human beings are compelled to decide and to act without any chance of awaiting the final deliverances of philosophical activity, human being as such further implies some *decisive* answer (that of hope or faith) to the question of comprehensive self-understanding – which is to say that human being as such implies a distinctively *religious* dimension. With Gamwell's argument, then, we have a case for thinking that the responsiveness to reasons that ineliminably characterizes human being does, in fact, find distinct expression in religious phenomena – a case, more precisely, for thinking that religious behavior essentially consists in attempts at decisively *answering* a question that cannot, in principle, be answered with anything like a scientific explanation: the "comprehensive" question of what authentic self-understanding would be. Gamwell's philosophical argument, it seems to me, thus recommends the conclusion that any full account of human being must involve some reference to the existential investment that human persons have in answering irreducibly normative questions about the nature and value of human existence.

3.6 Theology, Religious Studies, and the First Amendment

In the last sentence of the preceding section, I used the adjective "existential" advisedly; for Gamwell's approach has deep affinities with that of Christian theologian Schubert Ogden, whose work is much informed by the existentialist theology of Rudolf Bultmann.⁹ That the foregoing account thus has (not coincidentally) an unmistakably Protestant-theological tone is surely among the reasons why scholars of religious studies might be apt to resist it. My own work as a scholar of Buddhist philosophy inclines me to doubt whether I even understand the idea that human being as such necessarily raises something that can be characterized as "the

⁹For Ogden, too, "religion" likewise denotes "the primary form of culture in terms of which we human beings explicitly ask and answer the existential question of the meaning of ultimate reality for us" (1992, 5) – and Ogden, too, characteristically advances transcendental arguments to the effect that human existence as such necessarily implies some orientation to that question, such that "the existential question" is "never the question *whether* there is a ground of basic confidence in life's worth...rather, the question of faith is always *how* the ground of confidence can be so conceived and symbolized that our consent to life can be true and authentic." (1986, 108)

comprehensive question,” much less that there is anything it could look like for so all-encompassing a question to be “explicitly asked and answered.” It is, to be sure, undoubtedly characteristic of *some* religious traditions to favor this way of conceiving things; it seems to me, however, that there are some religious traditions that might be most adequately characterized as *refusing* that anything could count as answering such a question, and indeed as teaching that the human desire for such an answer is precisely the problem to be overcome by religious practice.¹⁰

Still, even this sort of orientation could in fact be captured in Gamwell’s terms; for it would make sense to say in the latter case that the “comprehensive question” of such a tradition would just be *whether there is any comprehensively authentic way of being human* – and Gamwell’s approach would allow, I think, that a tradition’s answer to this might be “No.” Nevertheless, the abstractness of Gamwell’s ambitious argument (and a generally prevailing suspicion of transcendental arguments) is still apt to occasion resistance. Despite my own eccentric predilection for transcendental arguments, I therefore want to suggest a more modest sort of case for thinking it matters, *pace* Tyler Roberts’s case for the distinctive character of broadly humanistic inquiry, whether it is particularly *religion* that we are “encountering.” I want to pursue this thought not with reference to any claims about uniquely “religious” ways of being human (nor to any particular definition of “religion”), but rather in terms of the distinctive character of religious studies as a historically specific scholarly discourse. I want to suggest that whether or not we take there to be any such thing as essentially “religious” activity, the contemporary academic fields of religious studies represent a distinctively significant site for recognizing the importance of Roberts’s case, even if that case is finally taken to concern the humanities in general. Scholars of religious studies, I thus mean to suggest, are uniquely positioned to see what Roberts has brought into view – uniquely positioned to see that the first-person perspectives of existentially involved human beings must remain part of any complete account of religious phenomena, and accordingly that no third-personal perspective can exhaust such phenomena. Scholars of religious studies are well positioned to see this, though, only insofar as they can overcome a habituated suspicion of theology (a suspicion that is veritably foundational for the field). This means recognizing, among other things, that the theological tone of Gamwell’s argument is not among the good reasons one might have for resisting his account.

One of the salient features of the contemporary discourse of religious studies, then, is an often profound anxiety with regard to the discourse of *theology*. There is, in this regard, little agreement about what, if anything, commonly defines the disparate fields of “religious studies,” which rightly denotes not a *discipline*, but rather an interdisciplinary field that’s individuated by a common object of study (hence my recurrent reference to the “fields of religious studies”). Despite, though, the important differences between (say) *anthropological* studies of religion and *philological* (or psychological, phenomenological, literary...) studies – and despite, as well, the lack of any consensus about a common *object* of study as unifying these (for how or

¹⁰ This is, for example, how I understand particularly the Madhyamaka tradition of Indian Buddhist philosophy; see, e.g., Arnold 2010.

whether “religion” can be definitively individuated has itself been much debated in the field) – there is a striking consensus at least that these fields can be commonly characterized as *not theology*. Indeed, “religious studies” has arguably emerged as an area of contemporary academic discourse only against the foil that is “theology”; *religious studies* is thus held to comprise all properly *critical* studies, specifically as opposed to the confessional orientation supposedly definitive of theology. (That the contemporary field is founded in a basic anxiety regarding this division is evident in, among other things, the extent to which it continues to be hotly debated whether theology has been thoroughly enough expunged from the field, or whether instead religious studies remains crypto-theological.¹¹)

Integral to this field-defining anxiety is the misguided notion that theological claims are uniquely normative, whereas the explanatory aims of the scholarly study of religious phenomena are somehow free of normative commitments; the critical inquiry of scholars, it is thus alleged, is value-free or objective in something like the way that is supposed to characterize scientific inquiry. I have, though, sketched a cogent line of argument to the effect that the possibility of all rational inquiry reflects capacities for reasoning that are first discovered in the fact that we understand what is asked of us when are asked whether anything is as we *ought* to do or think. That our first-personal experience of that fact necessarily remains in play is clear if we consider that the value or desirability of any rational inquiry we might pursue is always contestable; the view, e.g., that religious phenomena should be studied using the tools of ideology critique (instead of, say, philosophy) reflects particular judgments about the nature of human being (and of religions) – judgments, to be sure, that may well be defensible, but that must themselves be argued for.¹² No explanatory approach individuates itself as the right one any more than “religion” individuates itself as a natural kind, and any decisions in the matter necessarily imply normative judgments.

Indeed, important recent work in religious studies can be enlisted to show that many of the judgments that structure scholarly inquiry are conceptually on the same plane as the kinds of theological claims to which they are often opposed. Taking, for example, some recent scholarship concerning religion and law, let us start with a brief look at *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*, one of Winnifred Sullivan’s several important contributions to the recently emergent field of religion and law (Sullivan 2005). The impossibility in question centers on what is arguably an intractable tension at the heart of the U.S. Constitution’s First Amendment clauses regarding religious freedom – a tension, in particular, between the “establishment” clause (which enjoins that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion”) and the “free exercise” clause (which adds, “or prohibiting the free

¹¹ There is a vast literature that could be cited in connection with the claims and characterizations of this paragraph; for present purposes, it will suffice to refer the reader to Lewis 2011, which I here cite not only for its useful bibliographic references regarding a similar characterization of the field, but also as having been helpful to me in clarifying my own thinking about the issues here being scouted. I particularly commend Lewis’s thoughts regarding the culturally dominant characterization of religion as reason’s “other.”

¹² For some examples that helpfully elaborate this point, see Lewis 2011, 173–77.

exercise thereof"). This tension is compellingly brought into view by Sullivan's reflections on her own involvement, as an expert witness, in a Florida court case (*Warren vs. Boca Raton*) regarding an alleged infringement of religious freedom on the part of a cemetery that proscribed certain practices of grave-adornment that were held by their practitioners to be religiously enjoined.

What is most jurisprudentially salient about a case like this is that in order to adjudicate the question of whether the plaintiffs' demands for Constitutional protection were warranted, the court had first to determine whether or not the practices in question qualified as "religious" – and Sullivan and the other expert witnesses were accordingly present to "testify to the religiousness of the plaintiffs' activities at the cemetery" (2005, 55). Insofar, though, as the courts thus "need some way of deciding what counts as religion if they are to enforce these laws,"¹³ the question becomes: "Is it possible to do this without setting up a legal hierarchy of religious orthodoxy?" (2005, 3). In order, then, to determine whether the practices in question warranted protection under the First Amendment's *free exercise* clause, Sullivan contends that the court effectively had to reach a judgment inescapably at odds with the *establishment* clause: "One reading of the First Amendment would suggest that when the government gets into the business of defining religion, it gets into the business of establishing religion. The result is necessarily discriminatory. To define is to exclude, and to exclude is to discriminate" (pp.100–01).¹⁴

Another way to put the point here at issue, I would say, is that the question of how to define "religion" turns out to be an inexorably *theological* matter; any conclusion in the matter can only affirm or deny the plaintiffs' own theological convictions in the matter, and can only do so with reference to what will inevitably be theologically contestable criteria – there is no theologically neutral perspective from which the matter could be settled.¹⁵ That this is so does not have to mean

¹³ Also at issue in the case was the scope and enforceability of a particular piece of Florida legislation, the "Religious Freedom Restoration Act" – hence the reference to "these laws."

¹⁴ Sullivan further notes that "[i]f the *Warner* plaintiffs were to win eventually on the First Amendment claim, and religiously motivated persons were thereupon given an exemption from the Boca Raton Cemetery Regulations, the resulting favoring of religion over not-religion could arguably constitute and unconstitutional 'establishment of religion,' as prohibited by the First Amendment." (2005, 25) The same Constitutional tension has been much discussed by Stanley Fish; see, e.g., Fish 2001.

¹⁵ Tellingly, Sullivan reports that on the final day of the trial, the presiding judge announced that he had enjoyed the chance to "talk theology all day," with regard to which Sullivan comments that when he thus "speaks of 'talking theology' he is referring to his efforts to determine exactly what counts as religion for the purposes of law." (2005, 4) That there were indeed unavoidably *theological* considerations in play is clear from, *inter alia*, the recurrent theme of conflicting Protestant and Catholic intuitions about what "religion" is rightly thought to involve; for the plaintiffs in the case were Catholics for whom certain embodied practices are central to religious life, whereas the presiding judge (and a number of the expert witnesses) instead held views to the effect that "religion" is essentially a matter of belief or conscience. (See, e.g., pp.61–69, 92, *et passim*.) Conflicting intuitions along these lines have of course been historically central to the entire modern legal discourse of religious freedom; as Sullivan notes, citing the work of Philip Hamburger, "a persuasive case has been made that the doctrine of the separation of church and state, itself the central 'doc-

giving up on the idea that the state may nevertheless have a compelling interest in settling matters like this – it just means recognizing that nobody’s reasons for arguing as they do on this matter come from a conceptually neutral perspective. What is unavoidably at issue, then, is not just the application of theologically neutral norms, but rather the more basic question of which of various, equally “traditional” norms ought in the first place to apply. As Jeffrey Stout (2004) has cogently argued in this regard, democratic norms and procedures are not (as often claimed) value-neutral; these norms and procedures themselves represent, rather, a particular *tradition* of reasoning, which as such is not essentially different from, *inter alia*, history’s various religious traditions of reasoning. There is, in other words, no essential difference in the *kinds* of norms that can be thought to apply, no essentially “theological” norms that can be identified and assessed as such in contrast to uncontroversially “secular” norms. It would be better, in that case, to embrace the necessarily traditional character of whatever norms one invokes (and to argue for them as such), than to pretend that one’s own norms are neutral with respect to all others.

Of course, this only works insofar as the various parties to a dispute uphold traditions of *reasoning* – insofar, that is, as they are commonly committed to the views that any of the norms in play are in principle open to critique, and that appeals to reasons and evidence represent the relevant considerations. A fundamentalist tradition that is constitutively opposed to socially deliberative forms of life is not, of course, part of the same conversation, and the history of religions amply attests such traditions.¹⁶ But the history of religions attests, as well, richly sophisticated traditions of public debate and reasoned disagreement,¹⁷ and it is badly misguided (if perhaps understandable at some historical moments) to take only the former to exemplify “religion.” Against this, the depth of the field-defining anxiety we are scouting may reflect not so much (or not *only*) an aversion to the acknowledgment

trine’ of American church/state politics today, developed popularly as an anti-Catholic tool in the nineteenth century.” (2005, 62) Sullivan, who is not only a legal expert but also a scholar in religious studies, well appreciates points such as this; the failure of some involved in *Warren vs. Boca Raton* to share her more nuanced perspective led to sometimes breathtaking displays of obtuseness. Thus, for example, Sullivan reports that the first question she was asked at trial was, absurdly, this: “Could you tell the Court, give the Court a very brief history of the history of Christianity as it relates to Orthodox and Catholic and the Reformation and development of modern religion in America?” Appreciating the absurdity of the question, Sullivan said to the judge, “I’ll make this short,” to which he dismissively replied: “Well, I think I’ve got some background on that, but it’s got to be in the record. So go ahead.” (2005, 85) Given his own theological commitment to the eminently Protestant idea that “religion” was a matter of personal beliefs informed by Bible study, the singularly unimpressive judge evidently could not countenance the possibility that scholars might be any more expert in “religion” than he is.

¹⁶Jason Springs (2012) has thoughtfully considered something of the extent to which religious disagreement may thus irreducibly involve what he calls (following Chantal Mouffe) “agonistic pluralism,” which must remain largely intractable to philosophical settlement.

¹⁷Consider, in this regard, Clayton 2006 and Sen 2005 – two recent books that commonly argue (albeit in different ways) that the classical traditions of Indian philosophy, in particular, represent an ideal of reasoned public debate that was not predicated (as much Enlightenment thought arguably is) on the thought that only likelihood of agreement could attest thereto.

of normative claims per se, but rather the abiding presupposition that religion is to be characterized as rationality's "other" – that religion, in one familiar idiom, is simply a matter of "faith," where that means nothing more than *assent to propositions for which there is no evidence*. While we have seen that Sullivan's important work is helpful in bringing to light the unavoidability of reference to always contestable norms, we can also appreciate the issues we are scouting by considering an example of scholarship that significantly fails to be informed by work in religious studies – scholarship that, instead, uncritically presupposes the "locativist" idea that *religion* is essentially different from *reason*.

Some of the problems with uncritically accepting this presupposition are, then, clearly evident in another recent contribution to the literature on religion vis-à-vis Constitutional law: Brian Leiter's *Why Tolerate Religion?* (2013) Leiter's book develops an eminently defensible position with regard to a question well worth debating: Is there anything about *religion* that distinctively warrants the Constitutional protections afforded by the First Amendment? Or could the legitimately desirable ends here be realized simply by a more general recognition of a right to something like freedom of *conscience*? Appealing to both ethical and legal considerations, Leiter argues that something like the latter alternative is clearly preferable.¹⁸ While Leiter's position on the Constitutional question is, though, eminently defensible, his case for that conclusion is badly compromised by his breathtakingly unnuanced characterization of "religion." Chief among the defining characteristics of religion, for Leiter, is that religious beliefs, "in virtue of being based on 'faith,' are insulated from ordinary standards of evidence and rational justification" (2013, 34). Indeed, Leiter holds that "religious belief in the post-Enlightenment era involves culpable failures of epistemic warrant" (2013, 82). Leiter is certainly right, as he predicts in his Preface, that it "will become clear" to the reader that he assumes that "religious belief always involves some degree of *false* or at least *unwarranted* belief..." (2013, x).

There is much to be said about Leiter's often startlingly unsophisticated characterization of religious thought, and about the equally flat-footed character of much of the philosophical argument he offers in support of that. It could be noted, for example, that Leiter is an unregenerate empiricist whose scientistic dismissal of metaphysical considerations is not as philosophically mainstream as he seems to suppose; he seems, indeed, to uphold the kind of positivism characteristic of the Vienna Circle, which was widely abandoned after devastating philosophical critiques advanced in the middle of the twentieth century.¹⁹ It should be noted, too, that

¹⁸ So, too, for that matter, does Sullivan, who finally suggests that "freedom and equality are better realized, and liberty better defended, if religion, *qua* religion, is not made an object of specific legal protection. The legal defense of human dignity and of life beyond the state must be honored in other ways." (Sullivan 2005, 138)

¹⁹ Of *metaphysics*, for example, Leiter opines that it "seems to be distinguished, in part, by the relationship in which it stands to the *empirical evidence of the sciences*: namely, that such a view about the 'essence' or 'ultimate nature' of things neither *claims support from empirical evidence* nor *purports to be constrained by empirical evidence*" (2013, 47). While it is certainly right to say that most philosophers would distinguish essentially *metaphysical* questions from essentially *empirical* ones, it is philosophically naive to suppose that the difference can be characterized in terms of the failure of metaphysics to be scientific; there is a conceptually basic difference, e.g., between questions like *did this person commit the crime?* (which can be settled by empirical evi-

much of what here passes for argument for Leiter's central philosophical convictions consists largely in *ad hominem* attacks on thinkers whose often sophisticated arguments are characterized uncharitably (when they are not altogether ignored).²⁰ For present purposes, though, it is enough to ask whether the case for Leiter's eminently defensible Constitutional position requires that he say anything at all of the sort that he says about religion. As Sullivan's book shows, there is available an altogether different route to the same conclusion, one based only on attention to the incoherence that arguably obtains with respect to the two First Amendment clauses bearing on religious freedom. As against that kind of argument, it clearly reflects a very different rhetorical strategy to ask Leiter's title question insofar as that can be thus rephrased in light of Leiter's unsophisticated engagement with religion: *Why tolerate zealous commitment to manifestly false beliefs?*²¹

Leiter's guiding question clearly seems a little different when so baldly stated. Among the points to be made about this way of framing the issue, it seems to me, is that it represents a profoundly unskillful rhetorical strategy. Whom could Leiter hope to persuade by taking such an approach? There is nothing about the Constitutional position he takes that makes it obviously anathema to religiously committed people²²; why, then, not try to make a case that might be persuasive, as well, to them? Leiter's approach has the effect of contemptuously dismissing all religious perspectives as essentially based in a morally culpable "epistemic indifference"; a more rhetorically sophisticated case might instead avail itself of some characteristically religious perspectives, some of which can surely be enlisted to resist, say, the narrowly Protestant presuppositions that are seemingly central to the

dence), and *what is a "person"?* (which is not decidable only on empirical grounds, requiring, instead, analysis of a concept).

²⁰ Notwithstanding, for example, the extent to which many of the arguments of "reformed epistemologists" are arguably consistent with mainstream epistemological positions, Leiter – dismissing the idea that these philosophers might represent counter-examples to his claims about the manifestly unwarranted character of religious belief – says only that "I am going to assume – uncontroversially among most philosophers but controversially among reformed epistemologists – that 'reformed epistemology' is nothing more than an effort to insulate religious faith from ordinary standards of reasons and evidence in common sense and the sciences" (which he then takes to warrant the conclusion that religion is therefore "a *culpable* form of unwarranted belief given those ordinary epistemic standards") (2013, 81). Even more dismissively, Leiter says of all "nonnaturalist" versions of moral realism that they are "mere artifacts of academic philosophy, which, through specialization, encourages the dialectical ingenuity that results in every position in logical space finding a defender, no matter how bizarre." (2013, 152–41)

²¹ That this is effectively the way Leiter understands his title question is clear from such statements of his conclusion as this: "there is no apparent moral reason why states should carve out special protections that encourage individuals to structure their lives around categorical demands that are insulated from the standards of evidence and reasoning we everywhere else expect to constitute constraints on judgment and action... Singling out religion for toleration is tantamount to thinking we ought to encourage precisely this conjunction of categorical fervor and its basis in epistemic indifference..." (2013, 63–64)

²² This is not to say that all religious persons or communities would be satisfied with a First Amendment that enjoined toleration only of *conscientious beliefs* rather than of religion, per se; surely there are many material benefits that accrue to some communities in virtue of the status quo. My point is only that a great many religious persons or communities might well take guaranteed protection of conscientious beliefs to be sufficient – and that there may be no good reason, apart from self-interested material considerations, why that is not as they *ought* to hold.

framing of modern liberalism's discourse of religious toleration (and central, therefore, to the tensions at the heart of the First Amendment). Given, then, that his case doesn't in any way depend on his compellingly unsophisticated engagement with "religion," it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Leiter simply wanted to use a book about the jurisprudential conception of religion to unleash, as well, a positivist rant about the irrationality of religion. Religious adherents and scholars of religion alike, however favorably disposed they might be towards his Constitutional conclusions, are apt to be distracted from Leiter's legal case by the astonishingly shallow character of his engagement with religion.

Here, then, one might well advert to some of the changes in religious studies that I noted at the beginning of this essay; surely scholars of religious studies have been *right* to emphasize, in the last few decades, that the many and various phenomena of *being religious* are vastly more complex than can be captured in terms of creedal propositions (much less manifestly false ones). They would be right, to that extent, to marvel at the many things that Leiter's supposed theorization of "religion" leaves out of account – the embodied, social, lived dimensions that are essentially excluded, as well, by the First Amendment's characteristically Protestant presupposition that religion is entirely a matter of privately held subjective views. Winnifred Sullivan's work on law and religion is vastly more sophisticated in its informed engagement with religion in all its complexity – sophisticated enough, indeed, that the absurdity of much what was asked of her as an expert witness, by judges and attorneys who supposed themselves also to be expert just insofar as they were themselves religious, comes through clearly.²³

3.7 Concluding Unscientific Postscript

That Sullivan's legal sensibilities are informed by training as a scholar in religious studies makes it, I submit, easier for her to see that what is really problematic about the jurisprudential discourse regarding religion is its failure to accommodate the extent to which *all* discourse about religion is, in an important sense, inescapably "theological" – to see, that is, that determining what does (and what does not) legally count as "religious" is itself taking a position with religious implications. Attention to the complexity of religion thus helps us see the intractability of the tension that's arguably at the heart of the First Amendment – helps us see, in other words, that the fact that findings regarding the free exercise clause inevitably bring us up against the establishment clause can be expressed as the point that "freedom of religion" itself represents an ethical norm with inescapably theological dimensions.

And that situation, I have been aiming to suggest in wrapping this up, reflects the lesson that the academic fields of religious studies hold for the understanding of humanistic inquiry more generally. Tyler Roberts, we have seen, makes a cogent case for the ineliminable character of "irreducibly first-personal" considerations in the understanding of any human phenomenon; for distinctively human practices and

²³ See note 15, above.

behaviors constitutively reflect what I have characterized (following Kant) as *responsiveness to reasons*, which Gamwell characterizes as “self-understanding” – and we have entertained some cogent arguments for thinking both that human phenomena would not be the kinds of phenomena they are but for these features, and that these features cannot, in principle, be captured or explained by any exhaustively causal account. A full understanding of distinctively human phenomena cannot, to that extent, finally do away with the essentially normative considerations that make them so. Whether or not there is anything like a distinctively *religious* way in which such considerations show up – whether or not, that is, Franklin Gamwell is right to argue that human being as such necessarily implies a self-differentiating religious dimension – scholars of religion, I have been suggesting, are uniquely positioned to see that the first-person perspectives of existentially involved human beings cannot be left out of any account that aims to be exhaustive.

This is so, I have said, particularly insofar as scholars of religious studies allow themselves to overcome their field-defining anxiety regarding theology. Appropriately informed by the kinds of philosophical considerations developed here, religious studies represents a field that can be distinctively attuned to the inescapably normative and ethical character of human being, as such. Scholars in religious studies are in the business of cultivating in-depth, nuanced understanding of the innumerable and fathomlessly complex ways in which religion, for better and for worse, is inextricably intertwined with the history of human thought. Scholars in this field are, then, especially well equipped to resist the “locativist” idea that *religion* is essentially different from *reason*, and instead to recognize that *all* exercises of human reason – including the astonishing extensions thereof that ever increase our amazement at the many worlds opened to human understanding by the sciences – are developments of capacities first realized in our understanding what is asked of us when someone asks if we have done as we *ought* to do.

The exercise of reason, to that extent, inexorably involves normative considerations, which are, as such, not basically distinct in kind from theological considerations – a fact that is evident, we have seen, in the impossibility of *non-theologically* defining a legally secular sphere. And something like that, finally, is the thought I take to be embodied in the University of Chicago Divinity School’s unique institutional arrangement – given which arrangement, the phrase *religious studies* constitutively involves both an objective genitive (“studies *of religion*”), and a subjective genitive (“studies that *are religious*”). Even, then, if it is right to conclude that what Tyler Roberts finally offers is a case for the distinctiveness of humanistic inquiry in general, there is a case to be made for thinking that scholars of religious studies are especially well situated to realize that.

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Chapter 4

Religious Practices and the Formation of Subjects



Kevin Schilbrack

Abstract The academic study of religion in the past century has increasingly shifted from the study of religious texts to a broader vision that includes social practices, and this chapter argues that the discipline of philosophy of religion ought to expand its traditional object of study to follow suit. Illustrate how this shift has played out in three anthropological approaches: the Ricoeur-inspired hermeneutic approach of Clifford Geertz, the Foucault-inspired disciplinary approach of Talal Asad, and the Merleau-Ponty-inspired embodiment approach of Thomas Csordas. These approaches are often understood to conflict with each other on questions concerning subjectivity and in particular on the claim that social practices form the subjectivities of the participants. I argue that this disagreement is a philosophical one and that it provides an opportunity for philosophers of religion interested in religious practices to contribute to their theorizing. Properly understood, moreover, the three approaches can be understood to complement each other in a way that leads to an integrated approach so that despite the formation of subjectivity, the body in a religious practice is not only a text that one can read and not only the product of social power but also a perceiving, problem-solving person.

Keywords Hermeneutics · Genealogy · Embodiment · Subjectivity · Religious practices

4.1 Towards a Philosophy of Religious Practices

Philosophy of religion has traditionally had an intellectualist bias to the extent that the discipline has focused on religious truth claims and therefore engaged only with a relatively small fraction of what religious people do and care about.¹ The future of

¹ This is one of the themes for which I argue in *Philosophy and the Study of Religions* (2014).

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philosophy of religion should expand the proper objects of study from that traditional focus on doctrinal and philosophical texts to also include worship, dance, pilgrimage, rites of passage, feasts, meditation, asceticism, and the full range of religious practices. Enlarging our understanding in this way of the aspects of religions that ought to be studied by philosophers would have two benefits. Since religions as social realities involve much more than their texts, it would help philosophy of religion live up to its name. And since anthropology, gender studies, history, ritual studies, and other disciplines in the academic study of religion have taken religious practices as an object of study, this change would bring philosophy of religion out of its self-imposed disciplinary insularity and into a much richer academic conversation.

What would a philosophy of religious practices look like? The answer to this question is still new and deserves more attention. When philosophers reflect on religious truth claims, they can ask and answer the traditional evaluative questions that are distinctive to the discipline: is reality the way the religious community claims it is? Are those who hold religious beliefs warranted in holding them? Are religious experiences veridical? But the questions that philosophers should pursue about religious practices are still unsettled. A worship service is not true or false. If a given community celebrates religious feasts or religious fasts, it would be odd to argue that they are “warranted” in doing so, or that they are not. Moreover, the social and psychological functions of embodied religious practices have been extensively studied by those in anthropology and other social sciences. What contribution is there for philosophers of religion to make?

There are two basic answers. The first is that philosophers should contribute to the work of developing models for what religious practice is. The philosophical issue concerns the question: what kind of activity is a religious practice? For example, what does it mean to offer food to a being that has no body, to re-enact the original acts of one’s ancestors, or to visualize perfection? What goals are sought by the participants in these practices? To ask and answer these questions is to step back from the evaluative questions and to focus on the logically prior interpretive issue that those evaluative questions presuppose. These interpretive questions were pursued by Ludwig Wittgenstein (1979), for example, when he argued that James Frazer’s theory of religion mischaracterized religious practices by interpreting them as an instrumental activities based on a poor grasp of the laws of nature. Religious practices, according to Wittgenstein, had a different point and therefore operated with a different “grammar” than scientific practices. Whether he was right about this or not, the interpretive questions of clarifying the nature of religious practice are ones to which philosophers should contribute.²

The second kind of contribution that philosophers can make to the study of religious practices is to reflect, not on those practices directly, but rather on the philosophical presuppositions of the different ways that one can study them. When those

²The best recent philosophical contribution to the development of models of religious practices I know is Cuneo 2016.

in the humanities and the social sciences study religious practices, there are always philosophical questions that they have answered, at least implicitly.³ Certain religious studies approaches include presuppositions about what is and is not real, what is and is not reasonable for people to believe, and whether religious practices are oppressive or liberatory. The approaches carry assumptions – sometimes in agreement with those people being studied but often contradicting them – about the real causes of human behavior and the real limits of human experience. Presuppositions like these undergird and guide empirical work, but they are not themselves empirical claims, and philosophers should participate in the work of interrogating them. To distinguish this project from traditional philosophy of religion, one might call critical reflection on the metaphysical, epistemological, and axiological presuppositions operating in the study of religion “the philosophy of religious studies.”⁴ I think that the philosophy of religious studies fits naturally as a subfield of philosophy of religion, and it is to this subfield that I wish to contribute in this essay.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, religion was typically understood as a set of beliefs about the supernatural, beliefs that allegedly could be traced back to some remarkable experiences. But in the twentieth century, scholars of religion increasingly turned from that Protestant-inspired assumption to the view that religion encompassed more than what an individual believed. A religion was better seen as more complex and intersubjective, and “a set of beliefs” as an apposite for a religion was replaced with phrases like a way of life, a social structure, or a mode of discourse. This shift parallels the shift I recommend in philosophy of religion from its traditional focus on doctrinal and philosophical texts to a wider focus that also includes embodied religious practices, and it brings me to the point of this essay.

Classically, scholars treated religious people’s subjective experiences, beliefs, and desires as the explanation for religious behavior. Subjectivity, often understood with William James as “the feelings of individual men in their solitude,” was taken as foundational. But as the definition of religion shifted and religious subjectivity came increasingly to be understood in its social, historical, and institutional context, one could better see that those mental states were not simply those of autonomous individuals but rather were themselves the products of historically and culturally particular social structures. Perhaps the notion that people create their institutions should be reversed. This critique of the classical explanation of behavior, especially

³I here agree with the sociologist Christian Smith that “[b]ehind all theoretical and empirical scholarship stands some philosophy of reality and human knowledge (‘metaphysics’ and ‘epistemology’), and in the deeper background there usually stands a philosophy of what is good and bad, right and wrong (ethics). Many social scientists do not pay attention to the philosophies that underlie their work, but that does not decrease their influence. It only means they are less visible and acknowledged” (Smith 2017, 7).

⁴Jim Kanaris (2002) used this phrase before I did. Kanaris distinguishes the rest of the academic study of religion from a philosophy of religious studies as a “shift in focus ... from understanding those who practice religion to understanding oneself as practicing this understanding” (Kanaris 2018, 179–80).

by structuralists and post-structuralists, challenges the traditional place given to subjectivity in the study of religion.

Many historians and anthropologists and others involved in the study of human culture have struggled with the question of how to understand social practices without denying the causal contribution of belief, experience, and judgment (cf. Ortner 2006, esp. ch. 5). Several theorists today express skepticism that subjective mental states are the real causes of behavior; some eliminativists deny that the very category is coherent. My goal in this paper is to respond to this skepticism by sketching a path for the philosophical study of religious practices that takes with full seriousness the material reality of those practices without undermining the view that religious people are also subjects.⁵ This essay is therefore a contribution to what I called philosophy of religious studies. It focuses on philosophical questions about subjectivity in the context of a shift to the study of practices in our multidisciplinary field.

One especially illuminating way to focus on this shift in the field is by tracing the discussion whether scholars of religion should treat a religious practice as a kind of text in the sense that it communicates meanings that can be “read.” As I see it, that story has three stages. In the first stage, scholars propose that the study of religions *can* shift to include the study of practices because one can see a meaningful action as a kind of text. One might call this the hermeneutic paradigm for the study of religious practices. The most influential philosopher here is Paul Ricoeur, and perhaps the best-known anthropologist of religions who applied the hermeneutic paradigm to religious practices is Clifford Geertz. In the second stage, scholars turn away from treating an action as a text – from focusing on what a practice “says” – in order to focus instead on what the practice does to the participants in question. One might call this the disciplinary paradigm for the study of religious practices. The most influential philosopher here is Michel Foucault, and perhaps the best-known anthropologist of religions who applied the disciplinary paradigm to religious practices is Talal Asad. In the third stage, scholars argue that the disciplinary focus on the ways in which social practices inscribe cultural messages upon their participants does not really escape the hermeneutic paradigm’s metaphor that a practice is like a text. Moreover, the focus on disciplinary power risks treating ritual bodies solely as objects and overlooking the ways in which ritual bodies are also active subjects. One might call this the embodiment paradigm for the study of religious practices. The most influential philosopher here is Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and perhaps the best-known anthropologist of religions who applied this idea to religious practices is Thomas Csordas.

These three paradigms are not easy to reconcile, and the fundamental bone of contention between them is, I judge, precisely the place of subjectivity in one’s theory of practice. Asad offers the disciplinary approach specifically as an

⁵Producing a synthetic account of the tasks of academic study of religion that includes experience is a goal I share with Steven Bush’s excellent *Visions of Religion* (2014). For a critique of Bush 2014 and Schilbrack 2014 for seeking to include subjective experience, see Martin 2017, with responses from Schilbrack and Bush.

alternative to Geertz's hermeneutic project which, Asad alleges, treats religion as something going on inside people. And Csordas offers the embodiment paradigm specifically as an alternative to both the hermeneutic and the disciplinary approaches which, Csordas alleges, theorize the ritual body but overlook embodied subjectivity. Despite the tensions between the three approaches, however, the constructive goal of this paper is to provide an account that reconciles these three approaches in a way that leaves the study of religious practices with a single approach, one that is multi-faceted yet still coherent.

4.2 Hermeneutic and Disciplinary in the Study of Religious Practices

What does it mean to say that an action is a kind of text?

In a series of essays published in the 1970s, Paul Ricoeur proposed that to see an action as a kind of text requires one to take the event of a human action as it appears and disappears in time and to objectify or fix it in such a way as to identify in it the structure of a locutionary act. That is, one sees the action as someone communicating something to an audience. One can identify the propositional content of the action – the “*noema*,” what it says – and abstract it from the bodily movements and gestures that communicate it, and this kind of objectification is required if scholars are to speak of behavior as meaningful. On this hermeneutic approach, a text becomes a good paradigm for the object of the social sciences and the interpretation of texts becomes a good paradigm for the method of the social sciences. Like Peter Winch (1958) and Charles Taylor (1964), then, Ricoeur opposed the positivistic and behavioristic accounts of action that did not include cultural meanings and championed instead an interpretive social science.⁶

Clifford Geertz embraced the hermeneutic approach and, acknowledging his dependence on Ricoeur (Geertz 1973, 19), used it to argue for a symbolic conception not only of individual actions but also, more broadly, for a semiotic conception of culture as a whole. One can interpret an individual action as a text communicating a piece of local knowledge: for example, a person who winks is communicating according to a socially established code, as would one who parodies the wink (Geertz 1973, 6–7). The codes provide those who participate in the practice with a vocabulary of gestures with which to say something about their circumstances: “I am not being serious” or “That guy is ridiculous.” And one can then interpret a culture as a whole as an assemblage of texts (Geertz 1973, 5, 448). As Geertz puts it, “Doing ethnography is like trying to read a manuscript ... [written in] shaped behavior” (Geertz 1973, 10).

⁶See especially Ricoeur 1991. A nice overview of this theme in Ricoeur's work can be found in Reagan 1995.

The hermeneutic approach works with the assumption that meanings are often communicated through actions and it seeks to uncover those meanings. Even in practical activities, like a funeral at which a group disposes of a corpse or a cockfight where they gamble, the participants perform these activities in culturally distinctive ways that consciously or unconsciously say something about themselves. The practices one does and the style with which one does them provide a vehicle by which the participants IM each other about things. Though it is not wrong to say that, for Geertz, all human beings “seek meaning” in the sense that they seek lives that make sense to themselves, it is important to see that when Geertz “reads” a wink, funeral, installation ritual, dress code, or march, he does not claim that the participants say something about “meaning” or “a meaningful life” in the abstract. Instead, they say something (to borrow his examples) about their nation, or about violence, identity, human nature, legitimacy, revolution, ethnicity, urbanization, status, death, or time (Geertz 1973, 30). What practices say is particular and local, and it changes over time. And the particular practices that Geertz labels “religious” are those that place violence or status or one’s ethnic group into a metaphysical framework – that is, religious practices are those that teach that the social order is not simply a human creation but is rather part of the very nature of things (Geertz 1973, ch. 4).

Some of the messages coded in practices are conscious and explicit. Certainly, the people who use a wink to flirt know the code that they are drawing on. But Geertz provides for the possibility that performers tacitly communicate more than they recognize. A practice can also communicate latent messages. For instance, Geertz notes that those who bring their roosters to the cockfight and those who bet on them may communicate a message about male narcissism, status rivalry, and the nature of sacrifice that they have never explicitly thought and that they might not be able to articulate (Geertz 1973, 449). Thus the scholar who seeks to read cultural meanings, as Geertz puts it, “over the shoulders” (Geertz 1973, 452) of the participants in a social practice need not seek only to faithfully repeat what the participants know they are saying. Interpreters of human practices can also uncover meanings of which the practitioners are unaware or meanings that they might deny. The hermeneutic approach to the study of religious practices, therefore, does not impede one from analyzing a practice in terms of its unconscious psychological or social functions (Geertz 1973, 453).

Foucault was a critic of the hermeneutic approach to the study of social practices on the grounds that in its focus on interpreting hidden meanings and decoding symbols, it is blind to what the practice *does* to the participants. For Foucault, the hermeneutic approach (like its intellectual siblings, existentialism and phenomenology) assumes a naïve humanistic philosophy of the subject according to which the forms of social life – the practices, roles, and institutions – are simply the product of the outpouring of human concepts into the world. What is distinctive about Foucault’s approach is that it “reverses the course of energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection” (Foucault 1979, 138). The practices, roles, and institutions of our social environments produce human subjects, not the reverse. For Foucault, then, a social practice is best understood not metaphorically as a text to be read, but rather as a tool, device, or apparatus that shapes people.

The idea that is key to the disciplinary approach is that subjects are produced by and the effect of historically specific social forces. Foucault details how through the control of space (via enclosure, partitioning, functional sites, ranking, and interchangeability) and through the control of time (via timetables and programmes and the correlation of body and gesture and body with objects), modern hospitals, armies, schools, and factories were able to make human bodies docile and more useful. As the routines in these institutions drill people in proper behavior, they instill in them different identities, self-understandings, and desires – in short, different subjectivities. Social power does this work regardless of the conscious or unconscious intentions of the subjects that it forms. As in the quote above, Foucault calls this process of disciplining people with social forces while simultaneously constituting them as subjects, subjection (*assujettissement*).

Perhaps the foremost proponent of Foucault's disciplinary method in the study of religion is Talal Asad, and Asad argues that hermeneutic scholars distort religious practices (and certainly monastic disciplines) when they assume that the practices are performed to send a message. It is more accurate, instead, to see religious rituals, ceremonies, and spiritual disciplines as training the participants, inculcating in them the specific behaviors that have been authorized as proper. One should therefore set aside the idea that rituals are a form of coded communication, Asad says, and see them instead as trained performances. When one prostrates before another – or is made to prostrate before another – one does not say something in a coded way about submission; rather, one submits. In this way, the disciplinary approach enables one to “conceptualize human behavior in terms of learned capacities” and “to analyze the body as an assemblage of embodied attitudes, not as a medium of symbolic meanings” (Asad 1993, 75).

Asad explicitly criticizes Geertz's dispositional language of moods and motivations (Asad 1993, 33) and in their place he adopts Foucault's language that society “inscribes” its signs onto the body. One might describe this as a shift in the study of religious practices from the search for meanings that are private to “bodily marks” that are public. And it is absolutely true that one's learned modes of comportment, one's sex, the language one speaks, and one's style of clothes all may, as Foucault (1979, 25) says, “emit signs” in a way that is unconnected to the agent's intentions. The disciplinary approach therefore seeks to uncover what hermeneutics has not seen, namely, that the capacity of religious practices to teach moods and motivations *presupposes* the concrete arrangement of social power in institutions (Asad 1993, 36–7). It is not religious symbols by themselves that implant religious beliefs (Asad 1993, 35). Though religious practices may use symbols to say something, a given teaching is only persuasive in a discursive and social context in which that teaching can be received as plausible, normative, or authoritative. Because he does not analyze social power, “Geertz postulates the function of rituals in generating religious conviction ... but how or why this happens is nowhere explained” (Asad 1993, 50). By contrast, the disciplinary approach's focus on discipline gets at the material conditions under which religious teachings are possible. Unlike hermeneutics, the disciplinary approach is said to explain how religious practices actually do their work.

4.3 Reconciling the Hermeneutic and the Disciplinary Approaches

Geertz and Asad are typically read according to a narrative of replacement.⁷ I judge, however, that, properly understood, the hermeneutic and disciplinary approaches complement each other, and that a philosophy of religious practices should include both. In this section, I make this case.

The primary philosophical stumbling block to reconciling hermeneutic and disciplinary approaches to the study of religious practices is a disagreement about the notion of subjectivity, the notion that human beings have the capacities of perception, understanding, and volition so that they can be the efficient causes of their own actions. To mark the connection to the disciplines of the humanities, the academic study of human creativity, let us call an approach that includes such subjects a humanist one. Many have assumed that one has to choose between Geertz's hermeneutical approach as a humanist study of private, hidden meanings and Asad's disciplinary approach as a post-humanist study of public, visible forces. The difference is often framed as a choice between studying what is "private" or "internal" and what is "public" or "external." Asad himself describes the difference between his approach and that of Geertz in this way (e.g., Asad 1993, 47, 48), and Asad's account has been widely accepted by other theorists of religion.⁸ To be sure, if the hermeneutic approach seeks to explain religious practices by the beliefs and desires of the participants, and the disciplinary approach seeks to explain the beliefs and desires of the religious people by their participation in religious practices, then the two approaches understand the relationship of subjectivity and social structure in opposing ways. But this way of framing the difference between them is off target. The hermeneutical and disciplinary approaches can be reconciled because the claim that Geertz and Asad disagree about subjectivity is wrong about two significant points.

In the first place, Geertz does not locate meaning in an inner or private realm. Geertz fully assimilated the Wittgensteinian view in which meaning is intersubjective and social – in fact, the non-privacy of meaning is probably Geertz's foremost theoretical contribution to anthropology. He is therefore adamant that what a symbol means is not subjective, interior, or "in one's head" (Geertz 1973, 29–30). Geertz's slogan is that "Culture is public because meaning is" (Geertz 1973, 12), and he rejects the privatist interpretation of meaning explicitly and repeatedly.⁹ Moreover, he carries the rejection of the very idea of a private language into his

⁷Most recently, in Mitchell 2017.

⁸Asad's claim that Geertz assumes a Protestant conception of religion as a distinctive mental state distorts Geertz badly, but it has been endorsed by Bruce Lincoln (2003, 1) and Manuel Vásquez (2011, 221), and it has now made its way into introductory textbooks (e.g., Brodd et al. 2013, 7).

⁹To take one example of many, Geertz writes, "To undertake the study of cultural activity -- activity in which symbolism forms the positive content -- is thus not to abandon social analysis for a Platonic cave of shadows, to enter into a mentalistic world of introspective psychology or, worse, speculative philosophy, and wander there forever in a haze of 'Cognitions,' 'Affections,' 'Conations,' and other elusive entities. Cultural acts, the construction, apprehension, and utiliza-

interpretation of religions which he consistently treats not as doctrines held or experiences felt but rather as practice-centered forms of life. Though Asad criticizes Geertz for adopting a privatist understanding of religion that makes the category of “belief” central (Asad 1993, 47), the truth is that Geertz’s famous, multi-part definition of religion does not mention belief at all.¹⁰ Instead, Geertz makes social practices central to the creation of religious commitments: “it is in ritual – that is, consecrated behavior – that [the] conviction that religious conceptions are veridical and that religious directives are sound is somehow generated” (Geertz 1973, 112). Asad’s claim that Geertz largely ignores the discursive and institutional structures presupposed by symbols is a legitimate critique, but the claim that Geertz focuses on religions as private beliefs is a terrible misreading.¹¹

The second error is to assume that to adopt the disciplinary approach is to eliminate the subject. The disciplinary approach does focus on the ways that the operations of social power form people’s beliefs, desires, and choices. It rejects the notion of an autonomous or transcendental subject and instead historicizes the subject: no one has desires, thoughts, or choices free of her or his particular historical context. But the key question is whether the disciplinary approach (or the genealogical method more broadly¹²) implies that the actions of subjects are completely determined by their circumstances. Do subjects have any capacity to choose what they do? On the one hand, some take genealogy (to cite Foucault’s infamous phrases) to “dispense with” or “get rid of” the subject.¹³ On this interpretation of the formation of subjects, the disciplinary approach leads to the view that human subjects are constituted by non-intentional forces and they lack the ability to constitute themselves. Here, human desires, thoughts, and choices are nothing but the echo of one’s social circumstances. Foucault might suggest this interpretation when he speaks of human beings as “machines,” “automata,” and “objects” (Foucault 1979, 136, 155). If this view is right, then subjection means that people are solely the products and

tion of symbolic forms, are social events like any other; they are as public as marriage and as observable as agriculture” (Geertz 1973, 91).

¹⁰ Asad is also wrong that Geertz is guilty of the “modern idea that a religious practitioner cannot know how to live religiously without being able to articulate that knowledge,” and none of the quotes from Geertz that Asad offers support it (Asad 1993, 36).

¹¹ I argue this in detail in Schilbrack 2005 (cf. Bush 2014, 91–103). For other insightful defenses of Geertz against Asad’s critiques, see Johnson 2012 and Orsi 2014.

¹² I take genealogy, as a methodology, to be a matter of tracing something’s current state back through a series of formative stages in a way that motivates a novel evaluative judgment. This method may or may not focus on disciplinary practices. Thanks to Andrew Dole for help with this point.

¹³ These negative verbs are found here: “I don’t believe the problem can be solved by historicizing the subject as posited by the phenomenologists, fabricating a subject that evolves through the course of history. One has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that is to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework. And this is what I call genealogy” (Foucault 1980, 117). I read this “dispense with” as temporary, that is, as a methodological statement of bracketing the subject and not as an ontological statement denying that the subject exists.

not the producers of human identities, roles, and institutions. Disciplinary power, not individual choice, explains people's subjectivities. We might call this "either/or" position on the relation of power and subjectivity a radical post-structuralism. On this radical interpretation, the disciplinary approach involves the view that people lack the capacities to be the efficient causes of their own actions.

On the other hand, others interpret the disciplinary approach or genealogy to offer a "both/and" position on the relation of social power and subjectivity. On this interpretation, the genealogical critique of the autonomous subject entails that human thinking, desiring, and willing never float free of the influence of social power, and so subjectivity is always conditioned and constrained by non-intentional forces even though it is not exhausted by them. On this humanist interpretation, there is no non-material cogito and no ahistorical transcendental ego, but there continues to be (socially shaped) agency, decision, and will. This moderate position strikes me as commonsense and so we might call this a commonsense post-structuralism. If one embraces the radical interpretation of the disciplinary approach, one ends up with the elimination of the subject and a post-humanism without human agency. If one takes the commonsense interpretation, one ends up with a revised philosophy of the subject and a materialist humanism with human agency.

One cannot reconcile the disciplinary approach to the study of religious practices with the hermeneutical approach unless one adopts the commonsense interpretation of post-structuralism. But I judge that if one does adopt that interpretation and one does not deny the causal efficacy of subjectivity, then one sides with and not against both Foucault and Asad. That is, the claim that Ricoeur and Geertz assume that the subject has causal powers but Foucault and Asad reject this idea is confused, because neither Foucault nor Asad eliminate those powers.

First consider Foucault. Despite the infamous sentence quoted above, Foucault protested when he was read as denying the existence of the subject or replacing it with social power.¹⁴ Foucault insists that social forces shape human subjectivity in ways that naïve humanists have overlooked, but he does not reduce, collapse, or replace mental states with social structures. For Foucault, though what an individual judges or feels is not separate from social structures, one can nevertheless speak of subjectivity as a reality that is distinct from them. As he writes in this "both/and" vein: "The way [a person] thinks is related to society, politics, economics, and history and is also related to very general and universal categories and formal structures. But thought is something other than societal relations" (Foucault 1988, 10). This statement is a concise statement of precisely what I called a "commonsense post-structuralism."

From the commonsense perspective, genealogy is an investigative method that seeks to uncover how subjects are "constituted" – that is, how they come to experience the world in the particular ways they do – but it does not involve claims about how subjectivity, experience, or agency is created *de novo*. As Foucault says, "my

¹⁴For example, "it is not power, but the subject, which is the general theme of my research" (Foucault 1982, 209; cf. Allen 2000).

problem was not defining the moment from which something like the subject appeared” (quoted in Kelly 2013, 514). I agree with those who argue that, throughout his career, Foucault assumes the reality of subjects.¹⁵ Even before his turn to ethics in his later lectures and their explicit discussions of the creative powers of the self (e.g., Foucault 1997), therefore, Foucault proposes the concept of subjection not to deflate or eliminate subjectivity but rather to capture the way that agents are simultaneously objects and subjects, both acted upon and active, both produced by and productive of social structures.¹⁶ The disciplinary approach holds that the agency of subjects is necessarily constrained and enabled but that agency is not replaced by the social structures in which they operate. On this account, Foucault describes persons as automata or objects not to deny that subjects have volition but to underline that that volition is shaped by circumstances even to the point that subjects come to behave in automatic and non-intentional ways. The disciplinary approach thereby offers a critique of a free-floating view of subjectivity but does not aim to eliminate the concept altogether. Foucault articulates the “both/and” interpretation of his work when he describes it as “concerned not only with the acts that were permitted and forbidden but with the feelings represented, the thoughts, the desires one might experience, the drives to seek within the self any hidden feeling, any movement of the soul, and desire disguised under illusory forms” (Foucault 1988, 14).

One sees this same commonsense version of the disciplinary approach, the same critique-rather-than-elimination, in Asad’s work on religious practices. To be sure, Asad points out that Geertz undertheorizes the social power that is a condition for the efficacy of symbols. But when seeking to understand the difference between Geertz and Asad, it is important not to ignore Asad’s discussion of the concept of dispositions. Dispositions are tendencies to act, think, or feel in a specific way, and, since “moods and motivations” are dispositions, these subjective states are central to Geertz’s project. In his chapter on Geertz (which was first published in 1983), Asad highlights Geertz’s talk of moods and motivations as subjective, interior, and implicitly Christian. In place of internal dispositions, Asad borrows from Foucault the language of “marking” or “inscribing” the body, as if the effects of disciplinary practice are external or visible. In fact, one of Asad’s early essays uses the phrase “bodily marks” or “inscriptions on the body” at least ten times (Asad 1993, ch. 3). But despite the fact that some of the results of religious practice, like a participant’s comportment, may be visible, most of those results have to do with learned capacities which an observer might be able to verify only under certain conditions – or never. Training someone to act in one way rather than another, to see the world in

¹⁵ For a persuasive argument that Foucault’s allegedly anti-subjectivist works should be seen as (i) only the middle period of a career that began and ended with a focus on the subject and (ii) only a methodological bracketing in order to focus on non-subjective forces of discourse without denying the ontological reality of the subject, see Kelly 2013.

¹⁶ Judith Butler captures the sense in which Foucault’s idea includes both the passivity and activity of the subject: “‘subjection’ signifies the process of being subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject” (Butler 1997, 2).

one way rather than another, or to feel one way rather than another – that is, the process of subjection – is precisely to lead them to have certain dispositions. One simply cannot make sense of Foucault's and Asad's focus on disciplinary power without the subjectivist or mentalist concept of dispositions. The concept of dispositions is equally central to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* (cf. Bourdieu 1990, 53) and to Saba Mahmood's concept of ethical formation (cf. Mahmood 2005, 25–35). To take a disciplinary approach that historicizes the subject leads to the view that human beings are constituted by dispositions that may be remarkably different. Human subjects are the product of their social contexts in that what they take as beautiful, as just, as reasonable, and so on will vary according to the discursive and institutional apparatuses by which the person is shaped. But for Asad as for Foucault, the disciplinary approach does not drop the notion that human subjects are experiencing, desiring agents who have wills and make judgments. For this reason, if one asks whether human behavior is caused by social structure or by subjectivity, by non-intentional or by intentional forces, both Foucault and Asad provide us with the tools for a “both/and” rather than an “either/or” answer.¹⁷

In “Religion as an Anthropological Category,” Asad improves upon Geertz by seeking the institutional forms of knowledge and practice that inculcate moods and motivations, but he does not deny the existence or even the crucial importance of subjective mental states (Asad 1993, esp. 33–5, 50). In his more recent essays, moreover, the place given to subjectivity in Asad's account of religious practices is even clearer. References to “marking the body” become hard to find, and the language of inculcating or cultivating dispositions becomes common. Asad's recent work is full of the subjectivist language of emotions, experience, commitments, desires, affects, and sensibilities, and this is altogether apt when one embraces a commonsense post-structuralism that does not eliminate the subject. For Asad, how a subject responds to her environment is not merely an imposition by external forces but also involves the exercise of judgment and the possibility of introducing novelty (Asad 2012, 42).

When one recognizes that the hermeneutical and the disciplinary approaches both recognize the contribution of both subjects and social structures, one can also see that the explanation of subjectivity by social forces is not a project to which Geertz is blind. Geertz too sees social practices as sites where “individuals are put together” (Geertz 1973, 449), a place where sentiments are educated by aligning the participants' emotions with the ethos of the dominant culture. The hermeneutic

¹⁷ Asad's commonsense version of genealogy can be contrasted with the radical version found, for example, in Russell McCutcheon when he treats the scholarly focus on religious subjectivity, including talk of dispositions, not as an attempt to capture something real but rather as simply a rhetorical way for scholars to serve their own career interests: “The primary means by which scholars of religion gained ... protection and social identity was by their ability to define their project as the study of ‘religious experiences,’ conceived as interior, personal, and utterly unique emotive states and dispositions not accessible to the reductive gaze of social scientists” (McCutcheon 2003, 55).

approach does not rule out the disciplinary approach.¹⁸ One can see this complementarity, *inter alia*, in a quote that captures the central insight of the not yet fully emerged disciplinary approach when Geertz writes: “art forms [including religious practices] generate and regenerate the very subjectivity they pretend only to display ... [and] subjectivity does not properly exist until it is thus organized” (Geertz 1973, 451). In their role as what Geertz calls “models-for,” religious practices and other cultural forms “are not merely reflections of a pre-existing sensibility analogically represented; they are positive agents in the creation and maintenance of such a sensibility” (Geertz 1973, 451).

To sum up: my argument is that (i) since Geertz and Ricoeur locate meaning not in a private or subjective realm but rather in a public and intersubjective realm that includes non-intentional social forces, and (ii) since Foucault and Asad do not reject the causal contribution of subjective mental states but rather require them, hermeneutics and the disciplinary approach can be seen as complementary approaches to a common topic, namely: the relation of religious practices to the formation of subjectivity. On this shared topic, Geertz’s hermeneutic approach foregrounds the intentional aspects of human agency even while affirming the subjectivity is always formed by social practices, and Asad’s disciplinary approach foregrounds the non-intentional aspects of human agency, even while affirming that people both act and are acted upon.

4.4 The Embodiment Approach to the Study of Religious Practices

I now turn to a third approach to the study of social practices, what Thomas Csordas (1990, 1994, 1999) calls the “embodiment paradigm.”

Csordas argues that the theorizing of human behavior has overlooked embodiment, that is, the prereflective (though not pre-cultural) modes of perception of and engagement with one’s environment. This phenomenological appreciation of the body as the seat of subjectivity, inspired especially by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, is lacking in both the hermeneutic and the disciplinary approaches to the body. As we have seen, Ricoeur and Geertz treat an action as a text. When people are involved in ritual gestures, they express, symbolize, or represent certain meanings. But it is not

¹⁸ The claim that that the hermeneutic approach to religious practices includes both the subject as active and creative and the subject as passive and created will only surprise those who have a simplistic view of hermeneutics. Dilthey’s version of hermeneutics may have divided the world into two kinds of realities – human actions and non-human events – that call for two different methods of study. But Ricoeur sought to undermine this dichotomy, arguing that human behavior participated in both the voluntary and the involuntary and repeatedly insisting that human behavior is open to explanation both in terms of meaning and in terms of force: “The human phenomenon is situated between the two: between a causality that requires explanation and not understanding, and a motivation requiring purely rational understanding” (Ricoeur 1991, 134).

only the hermeneutic approach that treats religious practices as a kind of writing-to-be-read: Csordas points out that when Foucault and Asad speak of “the inscription of culture on the body” or “marking the body with signs,” they are moving within the same textualist or representationalist metaphor. Csordas notes that the model of a text is especially appealing to scholars who are disengaged from practice (or, perhaps instead, those whose primary practice is reading) so that a wink is a text, a dance is a text, sex is a text, and so on. The text is, Csordas says, a hungry metaphor, so hungry that it threatens to swallow all of culture “to the point where it became possible and even convincing to hear the deconstructionist motto that there is nothing outside the text” (Csordas 1999, 146).

What Merleau-Ponty and other phenomenological philosophers help us to retrieve, by contrast, are the bodily processes of perception and engaged being-in-the-world by which those representations come into being. This phenomenological approach does not repudiate the hermeneutic idea that a practice communicates according to local codes and can therefore be read, nor the disciplinary idea that a practice forms participants in ways that do not depend on their intentions. The embodiment paradigm is a complement to and not a rejection of the body-as-text metaphor. The recognition of the embodied nature of subjectivity therefore creates a synthetic proposal in which one sees the body as both the product of culture and as an existential reality in its own right, both as a system of representation and as a lived experience, both as object and as subject.

What does the embodiment paradigm contribute to a philosophy of religious practices? By emphasizing that beliefs and desires were produced by social forces, the disciplinary approach threatened to eliminate the subject, whereas the embodiment approach makes subjectivity central to the study of practices. When one adds the embodiment paradigm to the other approaches, therefore, one ends up with a pluralistic methodology that asks three kinds of questions, each seeking to grasp a different aspect of religious practices: the hermeneutic approach seeks to grasp what a practice says, the disciplinary approach what a practice does to the participants, and the embodiment approach the subjective experience of the participants. The crucial point for our purposes, however, is that since the embodiment paradigm complements and does not replace the other two, this approach does not treat religious subjectivity as autonomous or transcendental but rather as trained, cultivated, and formed – either by cultural meanings or by social power or both. To refer to religious subjectivity as embodied, then, is to point to a set of typically prereflective capacities for perception and judgment, capacities that are shaped by (though the use of these capacities is not determined or exhausted by) religious practices.

A concept that I consider helpful for the study of embodied religious subjectivity is that of “affordances.” “Affordances” is a term introduced by the psychologist James Gibson (1977, 1979) to name the properties of objects in the world insofar as they invite or solicit a specific use. For example, a chair invites one to sit down. More generally, “if an object that rests on the ground, has a surface that is itself sufficiently rigid, level, flat, and extended, and if this surface is raised approximately at the height of the knees of the human biped, then it affords sitting on” (Gibson 1977, 68). Philosophers debate the ontology of affordances, but I expect that the best way

to understand them is as relational properties. That is, just as the fact that X is taller than Y is a relational property of X that is not independent of Y's height, the fact that A affords an opportunity for B to act in a certain way would be a relational property of A that is not independent of B's bodily structure and capacities. In short, then, affordances are relational properties of objects in one's environment that one can come to see and use.

Gibson primarily spoke of affordances in the physical world. But to adapt this concept for the study of religious practices, we should note that not just physical realities but also social realities can be taken by a perceiving agent to provide an opportunity for action. For example, a lull in a conversation might afford someone an opportunity to introduce herself, or a loophole in a law might afford a tax break. My proposal, then, is that philosophers can adopt the embodiment paradigm as the part of a pluralistic methodology that lets them study religious practices as training embodied subjects in their ability to perceive and take advantage of affordances. Such an approach lets us speak of religious subjectivity in ways that are not mysterious or private. For example, a Confucian practice might train participants to see their physical and social environments as providing opportunities for them to develop filial piety. A Buddhist practice might train participants to see their physical and social environments as providing opportunities for them to overcome attachment. And so on. The proposal is that religious practices provide distinctive experiences in which participants can develop the ability to respond to what they should and should not see, feel, and do, the full range of religiously shaped perception, emotion, and action.¹⁹

If a philosophy of religious practices comes to include this embodied perspective, then the study of religious practices includes the study of normed subjective experience. Granted, ritual participants themselves may not be able to articulate these norms. But this is just because reflexivity and reason-giving are not necessary conditions for living a religious life, just as they are not required for living an ethical life (cf. Keane 2016, 24–25). This means that the difficulty involved in the study of embodied religious experiences is not that these experiences are private or inaccessible – they are not simply James's “feelings of individual men in their solitude” – but rather, merely, that they are taken for granted, tacit, and in the background. The solution to this difficulty is to bring them into the foreground through attention, phenomenological description, and critical reflection.

Some study religions with the view that social events are public and subjective states like perceptions, desires, and judgments are private, but this dualism renders problematic any possibility of including subjective experience in the academic study of religion. The problem of access arises: how can one get inside another person's head to determine what she is thinking – or even whether she is thinking? I suspect that there are many who assume that subjectivity is inaccessible, and this is what leads them to argue that scholars of religion should drop the category of “belief” (Sharf 1998; Lofton 2012) or the category of “experience” (Lincoln 2003;

¹⁹I develop this idea in an as-yet unpublished paper, “Religious Affordances.”

McCutcheon 2012). But from the perspective of the non-reductive materialist model of embodied subjectivity offered in this essay, that view reflects a dichotomized, Cartesian way of understanding people and there has been at least a century of work in philosophy by pragmatists, ordinary language philosophers, existentialists, and feminists dis-assembling it and of seeing subjectivity as social, discursive, and historically located. Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology and Csordas's cultural phenomenology are part of this post-Cartesian movement and they offer, I judge, a better way forward.

One last point. Csordas introduced the idea of embodiment as a complement to representationalist accounts of culture a quarter of a century ago and since that time there has emerged a burgeoning field in cognitive science devoted to the investigation of embodied cognition, that is, the investigation of perception and problem-solving precisely in the mode of prereflective being-in-the world.²⁰ These embodied experiences of perception and judgment involve looking for and making use of physical and social affordances, that is, solicitations for practical action in one's immediate environment. It is true that none of these embodied cognitive perceptions and judgments are free from the structures of social power, but it is also true that they are not determined by that power. Social practices do not eliminate novelty or creativity. It follows that, despite the formation of subjectivity, the body in a religious practice is not only a text that one can read and not only the product of social power but also a perceiving, problem-solving person.²¹

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²⁰ For an overview of embodiment as a research program, see Shapiro 2012.

²¹ Thanks to Andrew Dole, Joseph Weiss, and Cuong Mai for insightful discussions that improved this paper.

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Chapter 5

Philosophy of Lived Religion: The Next Revolution?



Timothy D. Knepper

Abstract Although the philosophy of religion is finally on its way to becoming religiously diversified, such diversification is only half the battle: injustices of creed have been addressed while injustices of class remain. If philosophy of religion is to be the philosophy of all religion, not just the philosophy of theism or of literate elites, then philosophy of religion needs to pay attention to the religious reasons and ideas of all religions and all classes, and to pay attention to those reasons and ideas as they live in the lives of these individuals and communities. This is what I call philosophy of *lived* religion: the philosophical study of all acts of religious reasoning, privileging contemporary, ordinary, and spoken acts of religious reasoning over past, elite, and written ones. In this essay I sketch the concept of *philosophy of lived religion*, focusing on the basic questions that humans typically ask (what, who, when, where, how, why), and responding to anticipated questions and issues along the way.

Keywords Philosophy of religion · Lived religion · Reasons · Diversity · Community

5.1 Introduction: Why Philosophy of Lived Religion?

Philosophy of lived religion was not the topic of my original presentation at the February 2017 colloquium of Boston University's Institute for Philosophy and Religion. Instead, I used that opportunity to introduce a program in comparative philosophy of religion that I direct at my own institution, Drake University, as well as to share the comparative conclusions of our 2013–15 lecture and dialogue series

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on ineffability.¹ In the course of the colloquium proceedings, however, I became gripped by the notion of *philosophy of lived religion*, or as I called it at the time, *street philosophy of religion*: What would philosophy of religion look like if it looked not to the “greatest textual hits” of the literate elite but to everyday, ordinary acts of religious reason-giving? Thus when an invitation to publish colloquium papers was announced shortly afterwards, I thought I’d try my hand at fleshing out the concept of philosophy of lived religion as I was beginning to understand it—and not only as I was beginning to understand *it*, but also as I continue to re-understand what the philosophy of religion should be and do. Increasingly, it is my perception that the philosophy of religion is finally on its way to becoming properly diversified: At the colloquium I learned about Tal Lewis’s 2015 *Why Philosophy Matters for the Study of Religion—and Vice Versa*, and I was also reminded of Tyler Robert’s 2013 *Encountering Religion*. Together with recent work that hammers home the need for philosophers of religion to study a religious-cultural diversity of reasons and ideas—Wesley Wildman’s 2011 *Religious Philosophy*, my own 2013 *The Ends of Philosophy of Religion*, and Kevin Schilbrack’s 2014 *Philosophy and the Study of Religions*—these works reflect significant development on the diversity front.² Increasingly, however, it is also my perception that diversification is only half the battle: injustices of creed have been addressed while injustices of class remain. And if philosophy of religion is to be the philosophy of all religion, not just the philosophy of theism or of literate elites, then philosophy of religion needs to pay attention to the religious reasons and ideas of all religions and all classes (not to mention all races, genders, orientations, cultures, and communities), and to pay attention to those reasons and ideas as they live in the lives of these individuals and communities. This is the call of philosophy of *lived religion*.

¹There are currently two components to The Comparison Project’s programming. Its core programming, which stretches back to the fall of 2012, consists of a biennial series of scholar lectures, practitioner dialogues, and comparative panels, together which address a core set of topics and problematics in the philosophy of religion. Our scholar lectures are now published (as academic essays), along with comparative philosophical conclusions, through our book-series contract with the international publisher Springer. Our first volume, *Ineffability: An Exercise in Comparative Philosophy of Religion* (Knepper and Kalmanson 2017), which is based on our 2013–15 lecture and dialogue series, was published in late 2017. In 2013 The Comparison Project began supplementing this core programming with an initiative in the “Religions of Des Moines.” Drake’s religion faculty teach a series of *Religions of Des Moines* courses, each of which introduces students to a religious tradition as it is practiced locally in some community. Students not only attend services at the community but also facilitate the creation of digital stories by and about members of the community. These stories are housed on The Comparison Project website, along with guides to the religious communities of Des Moines. We have also recently published a student-written, photo-illustrated book entitled *A Spectrum of Faith: Religions of the World in the Heartland of America* (2017), and we have begun a monthly open-houses series at local places of worship as well as an annual interfaith camp for local high-school students.

²I would be remiss if I didn’t also mention the five-year (2015–19), American Academy of Religion seminar that Gereon Kopf and I are directing: Global-Critical Philosophy of Religion. The seminar is devoted to developing and writing an undergraduate textbook in globally diverse and critically informed philosophy of religion.

The plan for this essay is simple: to sketch the concept of *philosophy of lived religion* as I have come to understand it, responding to anticipated questions and issues along the way. As a means of doing so, I structure my essay with the questions that we humans typically ask of anything: What is it? Who is involved, when and where? How is it done? And why should we do it? Before I get started, though, I'd like to do two quick things, if only because the idea of philosophy of lived religion is so novel: first, make a thumbnail sketch of the concept as I have come to understand it; second, address the closest variation of it among the new advances in philosophy of religion that I listed above.

By *philosophy of lived religion*, I have in mind the philosophical study not only of all religious traditions but also of all religious subjectivities (insofar as possible). Such a philosophy of lived religion considers all acts of religious reason-giving, not just those of the literate elite. In fact, such a philosophy of lived religion privileges contemporary, ordinary, and spoken acts of religious reason-giving over past, elite, and written ones. In short: such a philosophy of lived religion focuses on how people reason about religion in lived discourses and practices in their contemporary communities.³

I don't see anything quite like what I have in mind by *philosophy of lived religion*, even among the above examples of advances in philosophy of religion (including my own).⁴ The closest they come is Schilbrack's 2014 "manifesto" *Philosophy and the Study of Religions*, for which aspects or dimensions of religion other than just the cognitive or intellectual are proper objects of study in the philosophy of religion. These other aspects include the affective and conative, the latter of which is comprised of the ethical, political, and ritual (p. 18). Together with the cognitive, the affective and conative dimensions comprise the Y-axis of Schilbrack's representation of the content of philosophy of religion, the other two axes of which are the many different religious traditions of the world (X-axis) and the many different concepts of religious studies (Z-axis). With regard to this Y-axis, Schilbrack admonishes traditional philosophy of religion for being "intellectualist" insofar as it focuses on religious teachings by religious thinkers in religious texts. Doing so, he

³ See chaps. 1 and 8 of McGuire 2008 for an introduction to the concept of lived religion. See also the essays in Hall 1997.

⁴ I did turn up a short essay by Ivan Strenski entitled "Philosophy of (Lived) Religion" (Strenski 2012), which was originally delivered as part of a panel session on "Possible Futures for Philosophy of Religion" at the 2010 meeting of the International Association for the History of Religion (and later published in a special edition of *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses*). Strenski argues that whereas the term *philosophy* should retain its dominant meaning of analysis (as in *analytic* philosophy of religion), the term *religion* should be widened to include more than just the cognitive/intellectual aspects of religion. In the way of examples, Strenski lists concepts such as affiliation, cultures and communities, materiality, practices, emotional life, and bodies. For Strenski, philosophy of (lived) religion involves critical analysis of such second-order concepts and the questions that attend them. As will become clearer below, this is not what I have in mind by *philosophy of lived religion*. Note that Roberts 2013 also devotes considerable attention to the notion of lived religion, but his philosophy of religion is more of a *lived* philosophy of religion than a philosophy of *lived* religion, at least I develop the notion of philosophy of lived religion here. For a little more on this distinction, see Sect. 5.6.

charges, fails to take account of the full range of religious practices, due in large part to the fact that explicit, written arguments are absent or insignificant in many religious communities (p. xii). Moreover, doing so is classist and sexist insofar as “the task of developing and defending religious doctrines tends to be the work of literate elites, typically from a leisured class and typically male” (p. 15). The second chapter of Schilbrack’s manifesto therefore goes on to develop tools for the philosophical study of the lived religious practice of ordinary people by drawing on contemporary theories of conceptual metaphor and extended mind. Crucial to this aspect of Schilbrack’s proposal is his claim that religious practices are not just expressions of thinking but also instances of thinking.

5.2 What Is Philosophy of Lived Religion?

All of this is true, important, and useful. Still, it does not entirely capture what I have come to understand as the philosophy of lived religion, which, like traditional philosophy of religion, remains focused on religious reasons and ideas, but unlike traditional philosophy of religion, looks for these reasons and ideas not just in the texts of literate elites but also in the discourses of ordinary people. This brings me to a consideration of my first question, *What* is philosophy of lived religion? At entry level, my answer to this question is really no different than my answer to the question: What is philosophy of religion? Philosophy of (lived) religion is the study of religious reason-giving, where this study involves the description, comparison, explanation, and evaluation of instances and forms of religious reason-giving in a diversity of religious traditions and communities. It is the *religious reason-giving* component of this definition that concerns me here: Philosophy of (lived) religion focuses on acts of giving reasons about religion. What does this mean? It means, first of all, that philosophy of (lived) religion focuses on *actual instances* of reason-giving, not on abstracted, generalized reasons and ideas. It means, secondly, that philosophy of (lived) religion focuses on actual instances of reason-giving by *actual people*, not on whole traditions or communities.⁵ And it means, thirdly, that philosophy of (lived) religion includes the *relevant contextual details* of instances of reason-giving—everything from set and setting to aim and force to use and effect—not just the actual arguments themselves. Perhaps the only thing that distinguishes the philosophy of lived religion from the philosophy of religion then is that the former focuses on *contemporary acts* of religious reason-giving in *some local community*. More on this in due time.

The first question that concerns this *what* of philosophy of lived religion is this: Just which acts of religious reason-giving does the philosopher of religion study?

⁵This is not to say that there is no value in generalities. As an undergraduate professor of religion, I certainly appreciate their utility. And as a scholar of religion, I am particularly interested in understanding how traditions are formed and sustained, as well they inform individuals and get modified by them.

After all, there are countless such acts. I do not have a simple or singular answer to this question. I do believe that if philosophy of religion is to live up to its name—i.e., philosophy *of religion*, not just of some particular religion or kind of religion—then it needs to study a diversity of acts of religious reason-giving in a diversity of religious and quasi-religious traditions and communities. And this diversity should run the gamut—not only diversities of religion but also diversities of race, gender, class, and orientation.⁶ (More on this in the next section.) Beyond even this, I have elsewhere advanced a central target of sorts for the philosopher of religion's study of religious reason-giving: those acts of reason-giving in which the reasonableness of some religious practice or belief is at issue.⁷ Still, it is no doubt the case that the philosopher of religion will study those acts of religious reason-giving that she finds personally interesting and socially important; there is nothing wrong with this, provided that such interests and importances do not serve as excuses for ethnocentric exclusions of religious-cultural diversities.

A second question involves one of the above points raised by Kevin Schilbrack: Does focusing on religious reason-giving unjustly privilege not only doctrinal, textual religions but also a male, literate elite? There are two components to this issue. Regarding the first, the alleged privileging of religious traditions that privilege the teachings of thinkers in texts, I want to make it clear that neither my philosophy of religion in general nor the philosophy of lived religion that I advance here look only to religious texts for examples of religious reasoning giving. In fact, the philosophy of lived religion that I have in mind looks mostly to speech acts and oral discourse for acts of religious reason-giving. Nevertheless, I am of the opinion that the aspects of religion studied by the philosophy of religion are reasons, not practices. This is not to say that practices cannot and should not be mined for the forms of religious reason-giving that they enact and even constitute. But I do believe that the philosopher of religion studies practices precisely in order to “get at” reasons, etc. (Perhaps Schilbrack and I are not so far apart in this respect.) Having addressed these preliminary concerns, we arrive at the sharp edge of the first half of Schilbrack's critique: Are acts of religious reason-giving, whether written or oral, present in *all* religious

⁶I try to avoid entanglement in the semantic thickets of “religion,” since I do not believe it matters much for philosophy of religion (as I understand it) how some instance of reason-giving gets labeled. What matters is that there are instances of reason-giving regarding similar topics in different cultural-historical forms. True, I believe that these topics are religious or quasi-religious ones, concerning those practices and beliefs that structure the orientation of some community around its ultimate problems and solutions, paths and destinations, realities and truths. (Please allow the full semantic resonances of *ultimate* to ring out, not just the Tillichian ones.) But it is these topics (*qua* comparative categories), not “religion,” about which the philosopher of religion needs to be most critically mindful. Thus, I am inclined to think that philosophers of religion might largely dispense with the category of religion at the beginning of their inquiry. For more on this see chap. 4 of Knepper (2013) as well as my forthcoming essay (Knepper [forthcoming](#)) “Why Philosophers of Religion Don't Need ‘Religion.’”

⁷See chap. 4 of Knepper (2013). There I develop the practice of targeting formal acts of reason-giving concerning the reasonableness of some religious belief or practice in those contexts in which it is contested and defended.

traditions and communities? Or are they only or mostly present in religious traditions and communities that privilege the teachings of thinkers in texts? Unfortunately, I don't have a sociologically informed answer to this question. Anecdotally, my international travels and relations lead me to believe that many different people from many different religions and cultures reason about religion, whether explicitly or implicitly, all the more so as our world continues to "shrink"—as *religion* becomes a global category and identity marker; as different religious communities learn more about, and often find themselves living in close proximity to, one another; and as science and technology continue to affect the way we live and view more traditional understandings of ourselves and our world. I would not go so far as to claim that acts of religious reason-giving are always explicit or argumentative in nature. But that need not deter the philosopher of religion who can make use of social-scientific and humanistic means of making the implicit explicit. Thus in the very least I believe we can leave it as working hypothesis that religious reason-giving is present in all religious traditions and communities, and therefore that the study of religious reason-giving does not unjustly privilege certain religious traditions and communities.

What, then, about Schilbrack's second concern—the privileging of a male, literate elite? I hope I've said enough above about Schilbrack's first concern to show that his second concern has been addressed in it—if the study of religious reason-giving does not primarily involve the study of texts, if it is instead the study of acts of religious reason-giving in live discourse, then the study of religious reason-giving need not privilege a male, literate elite. More on this in the next section.

5.3 The Philosophy of *Whose Lived Religion, When, and Where?*

Whose lived religion does the philosopher of religion philosophize about? I have already answered this question, even if only implicitly: The philosopher of religion studies the acts of religious reason-giving of all classes, creeds, races, genders, and orientations of people, not just the "greatest hits" of the literate elite. Of course this raises an initial question similar to that above: If there are a countless number of acts of religious reason-giving, exactly whose acts does the philosopher of religion prioritize? Although an answer to this question also mirrors that above—i.e., a diversity of people's acts of religious reason-giving, people's acts of religious reasoning-giving that concern the reasonableness of religious practices and beliefs, people's acts of religious reason-giving that are interesting and important—it leaves one issue unaddressed: What about acts of religious reason-giving that are obviously invalid, unsound, or improbable? An answer to this question follows from the nature of the philosophy of lived religion: Given that the philosopher of lived religion is interested in studying how people actually do reason about religion, the philosopher of lived religion also studies ostensibly invalid, unsound, or improbable acts of religious reason-giving—especially when such acts are socially significant.

Note, though, that this is not to say that the philosopher of lived religion leaves such acts unevaluated. More on this in the next section.

A second issue concerning the *who* of philosophy of lived religion follows from this first issue: Why shouldn't the philosopher of lived religion study only the acts of religious reason-giving of literate elites, those whose arguments are less likely to be invalid, unsound, or improbable? After all, philosophers of science don't study the ideas and arguments of specious scientific theories. Or do they? Although I am no philosopher of science, I have taught philosophy of science enough to know that philosophers of science do study both "pseudoscience" and the discredited scientific theories of the past, if only in an effort to ascertain what distinguishes a bona fide scientific theory from a mere pretender, as well as when to know whether some scientific theory is true or not. It should come as no surprise that neither issue is very clear.⁸ How much more so in fields like philosophy and religious studies, where theories don't enjoy immediate, direct, and reproducible empirical feedback! And this is as true for religious traditions as it is for religious reasons. Just as it is in no way clear that Christianity or theism is a superior religious or theological tradition, so it is in no way clear that cosmological or theodicy arguments are superior types of religious reasons, particularly as they are delivered by this or that literate elite. To be sure, such religious traditions and arguments have occupied the minds and pens of a good many philosophers of religion in the modern west. But whether this should be attributed to inherent merit or (neo)colonial power is by no means certain. And regardless, philosophy of lived religion is preeminently concerned with how religious practitioners reason about lived religion. This is not to exclude the religious reason-giving of the literate elite; philosophical theologians and philosophers of religion too are studied by the philosopher of lived religion. They're just not privileged; nor do they get to speak for traditions or communities as a whole. More on this now.

When and where are the acts of religious reason-giving that the philosopher of lived religion studies? It is here that I see the greatest difference between philosophy of religion and philosophy of *lived* religion, for in the former case the philosopher of religion studies acts of religious reason-giving throughout time and space, whereas the philosopher of lived religion focuses on acts of religious reason-giving in her community right now. This is simply because the philosopher of lived religion must be able to encounter and respond to reason-giving as it lives in the lives of religious practitioners. Of course, this does not rule out the possibility of the philosopher of religion travelling elsewhere to embed herself in some locality other than her own (assuming that any of us has just one locality in the first place).⁹ Nor

⁸Just about any introductory textbook in the philosophy of religion will show just this. I myself have used Curd and Cover's *Philosophy of Science: The Central Issues* (1998).

⁹I suppose it is also possible for the philosopher of religion to read the transcriptions of observations and interviews that were conducted elsewhere in space or time. There is, however, a degree of connection that is lost; moreover, in such cases the philosopher of religion loses the opportunity to encounter and be responsive to religious reason-giving in her local community. For more on this, see Sect. 5.5 below.

is the philosopher of religion ignorant of the fact that the religious reasons and ideas of the “outside” and “past” always already affect those of the community that she studies. Thus the philosopher of living religion can better come to understand the dynamics between outside and inside, past and present, tradition and individual. In each case there is no, e.g., pure and monolithic Christianity with a singular set of unadulterated ideas and reasons. Rather, there are individuals and communities who identify as Christian but differ to degrees in their ideas and reasons, whose Christianities differently appropriate, whether consciously or not, the ideas and reasons of others, be they others of space or of time, others who themselves identify as Christian or not. By paying close attention to active forms of reason-giving in her local community, along with an informed understanding of the relevant histories and alternate localities of religious reason-giving, the philosopher of lived religion can better understand and appreciate such dynamics, thereby gaining a more robust and nuanced understanding and appreciation for how religious reason-giving operates in the lived religion of actual practitioners.

5.4 *How to Philosophize about Lived Religion?*

As in the case of the *what* of philosophy of lived religion, my understanding of the *how* of philosophy of lived religion does not differ substantially from that of how philosophy of religion in general gets practiced. This involves a four-step method: description, comparison, explanation, and evaluation.¹⁰ Although the method of philosophy of *lived* religion is not different in these broad strokes, there is in each case “a twist.”

Description in general is simply a means of rendering the object of inquiry—in this case, religious reason-giving—in as much contextual detail as is needed to understand it relative to its use. As I mentioned above, this includes everything from cultural and psychological settings and set, to political and rhetorical aims and uses, to conceptual meanings and logical forms. Although philosophers of religion in general almost exclusively consult texts for their descriptions, philosophers of *lived* religion must also learn and utilize social-scientific methods, as the forms of religious reason-giving that they explore are often located in oral discourse. Also, in the case of lived religion, it is not usually the case that acts of religious reason-giving are “lying about” in the world for the philosopher of lived religion to come investigate (as they are in the case of texts); rather, the philosopher of lived religion must sometimes help bring voice to such reasons, be it through interview, survey, or pre-arranged dialogue and debate.

¹⁰ See especially Knepper (2013). Note that I now think of explanation as a step unto its own rather than just a facet of comparison. Whereas the goal of comparison is that of identifying important and interesting similarities and differences, explanation seeks to give reasons for these similarities and differences.

Comparison, second, is the means by which important and interesting similarities and differences are discovered—or created—among the descriptions. Comparison is an indispensable component of any philosophy of religion that rises above the investigation of individual instances of religious reasons and ideas, since it is the means by which the philosopher of religion says how two or more things are similar and different. Comparison therefore should be mindful about the categories that it uses to compare, particularly when these categories are not native to all the objects of comparison—for when objects of inquiry are translated into and compared by means of non-native categories, they can often look strange or deficient vis-à-vis objects of inquiry that do not require such translation.¹¹ In the case of philosophy of *lived* religion, this issue of category vetting is a bit more immediate, often affecting the ways in which the “data” are collected in the first place. If interview and dialogue questions are articulated using categories that just don’t translate very well, then the subject’s forms of religious reason-giving can look weird or wrong from the very outset.

Explanation, third, gives reasons why the comparative data are patterned as they are—why they possess the important and interesting similarities and differences that they do. Explanation utilizes concepts and theories from any discipline that might shed light on this data—natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities alike. But in the case of a small-scale, local endeavor like philosophy of lived religion, it seems that explanations will also involve local contingencies and idiosyncrasies. Explanations will at least want to begin locally, in a manner that does not redescribe or reduce too drastically. Whether more large-scale, global explanations of the data are also possible will need to be ascertained on a case by case basis.

Evaluation, finally, raises philosophical questions of truth, value, and meaning about the object of inquiry in comparative perspective. There is no consensus among philosophers of religion about how this gets done—traditional philosophers of religion ask questions of conceptual meaning and argumentative truth, while continental philosophers of religion search issues of existential meaning and cultural value. In the case of philosophy of *lived* religion (if not also in the philosophy of religion in general), this variety is a good thing, as evaluation needs to be sensitive to the contexts in which it’s practiced. All the same, I do believe that, just as philosophy of religion only becomes philosophy *of religion* as it considers religion in its teeming multiplicity, so philosophy of religion only becomes *philosophy* of religion as it takes up the task of evaluation. On my model of philosophy of religion in general,

¹¹ In principle, I am therefore in agreement with the Comparative Religious Ideas Project’s effort to utilize “vague” categories in which different and even contradictory objects can be compared without any appearing inferior or bizarre; see Neville and Wildman’s essays “On Comparing Religious Ideas” in *The Human Condition* (2001a) and *Ultimate Realities* (2001b). Ideally, these categories will come from discourses either that are not proprietary to any particular religious tradition or that have some measure of quasi-universality. I myself have been intrigued with looking to the fields of metaphor theory or semantic universals for such categories. For the former, see Lakoff and Johnson (1980 and 1999), as well as my forthcoming “Philosophy of Religion as Journey: How Metaphor Theory Can Reshape Global-Critical Philosophy of Religion.” For the latter see, Paden (2001 and 2006), as well as Chap. 5 of my own *The Ends of Philosophy of Religion* (2013).

evaluation is not of entire traditions but rather of types of reasons and ideas. Moreover, on my model of philosophy of religion in general, evaluation is humble and fallible, remaining critical of its own biases and contexts, respectful of others' biases and contexts, and mindful of the ever-changing nature of knowledge in general and the indirect nature of the evaluative process in philosophy of religion in particular. In such a way evaluation serves an indispensable personal use—a means of taking seriously one's own quest for truth and meaning and value. And evaluation also serves as an indispensable means of taking seriously the religions of the world—of treating them not as cute and curious objects to be admired in their weirdness, but as living traditions of thinking and behaving that make truth claims about how things are and value claims how life should be lived. All of these principles and values need to be fore-fronted in the case of philosophy of *lived* religion, where our evaluative practices and procedures are embedded in the local community, not casting judgment on it from above. Philosophy of religion is here a means of taking seriously, of showing respect, of entering into reasoned dialogue, of making one's own reasons vulnerable. Philosophy of religion is here a means of teaching, at least as I practice teaching in a university setting—it encourages understanding of the other, critical reflection on oneself, and living in a way that meaningfully engages what one understands to be real, true, and good.

5.5 Why Philosophize about Lived Religion?

I hope I have already intimated above my answers to our final question: Why should philosophers of religion philosophize about lived religion? Here let me make them explicit. First, there are reasons of fidelity: Philosophers of religion should be concerned with how people actually do reason about religion; they should look to actualities not abstractions. Second, there are reasons of equity: Philosophers of religion should be concerned with how all people reason about religion; they should look to the religious reason-giving of more than just the literate elite. Third, there are reasons of locality: Philosophers of religion should be concerned with how people reason about religion in their local communities; they should look to immediate, living forms of religious reason-giving rather than (or at least in addition to) the texts of the past. And fourth, there are reasons of engagement: Philosophers of religion should be concerned to interact with religious reason-giving in their local community; they should look to make a difference where difference can be made. Underlying all these reasons lurks the question: What is philosophy of religion for? Is it for the academe alone? Is it for the sake of influencing other academicians, of winning them over to theism or atheism? Is it for the sake of recovering a past that testifies on behalf of our worldview and values? Or of recovering the past just to get it right? Or is philosophy of religion for the sake of ascertaining how people in our local communities actually do reason about religion and engaging with them in such endeavors?

Perhaps one objection to these reasons is simply the current state of philosophy of religion. Isn't it flourishing like never before? Of course, colonialism too once flourished. In fact, some would argue that colonialisms of ideas (among other kinds

of colonialisms) still flourish. Is philosophy of religion one such colonialism? Perhaps not if it simply sticks to the rationality of modern-western theism, one might say. But even then, isn't it stipulating a singular form of theism, elevating it above others, disseminating it as norm, and compelling others to adopt it (should they want to join the academic game of philosophy of religion)? Doesn't this theism thereby become the normative form of religious belief (at least among academics)? Doesn't it bring with it a certain Christianity? Do all other conceptualizations of ultimate reality (for lack of a better term) thereby look abnormal or irrational? Must they articulate and defend themselves vis-à-vis theism? Must all religious traditions and communities have and forefront a conceptualization of ultimate reality to do so? I am not so naïve to believe that there are ways of doing philosophy of religion that aren't in some way "colonialist"—after all, both philosophy and religion, not to mention philosophy of religion, are modern western concepts and practices. Still, I maintain that philosophy of religion is not flourishing so long as it neglects or belittles the religions of the other.

But isn't it sufficient simply to "globalize" the philosophy of religion? Why must philosophy of religion also focus on lived religion of the local community? I don't mean to state or suggest that philosophy of religion *must* focus on the lived religion of the local community. In fact, one of the "hats" that I wear is that of a scholar of the sixth-century Christian Neoplatonist "mystic" known as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. I am proud of the work that I've done on the Dionysian corpus; not only does it advance a textual-historical understanding of the Dionysian corpus itself, but it also furthers the philosophy of religion with regard to topics such as religious pluralism, apophatic theology, and ineffability. Still, the sad reality is that this work will have little to no impact outside a small niche of the academe. Is the same true of philosophy of religion in general? Of course certain luminaries will have some impact outside our field. And we will all hopefully have some impact through our students. But a philosophy of lived religion that investigates and engages acts of religious reason-giving in the local community stands to make a much greater difference. Perhaps it's still the case that, with regard to the rationality of religion, the philosopher of religion will have little influence in the end, and that broader forces will instead prevail—forces pertaining to scientific advances, social changes, ecological disasters, cataclysmic wars, space exploration, and so forth. But a philosophy of lived religion stands a better chance at least of keeping abreast of how the general public reasons about religion, if not also of influencing religious reason-giving in the local community.

5.6 Conclusion: Philosophy of Lived Religion as Lived Philosophy of Religion

Three paragraphs above I suggested that philosopher of religion should "think local," philosophizing about lived religion in their local communities. Here, by way of conclusion, I want to suggest that to think local in such a way is to "think personal"—to think about what we ourselves reason to be real, true, and good, and how

that informs our actions and relationships. Of course, thinking local is not the only way to think personal. Philosophers of religion are among the few academics whose research routinely provokes reflection on their own lives, no matter if they are studying millennia-old texts or contemporary arguments. But to engage in reason-giving in one's own local community is to provoke reflection on one's life in a way that is not only more immediate and frequent but also more in touch with and vulnerable to the religious reason-giving of the other. Here, our own reasons get interrogated not indirectly via texts but directly via persons. Here, philosophy of lived religion is most fully lived philosophy of religion.

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Chapter 6

Liturgical Philosophy of Religion: An Untimely Manifesto about Sincerity, Acceptance, and Hope



Andrew Chignell

Abstract This loosely-argued manifesto contains some suggestions regarding what the philosophy of religion might become in the twenty-first century. It was written for a brainstorming workshop over a decade ago, and some of the recommendations and predictions it contains have already been partly actualized (that's why it is now a bit "untimely"). The goal is to sketch three aspects of a salutary "liturgical turn" in philosophy of religion. (Note: "liturgy" here refers very broadly to communal religious service and experience generally, not anything specifically "high church.") The first involves the attitudes that characterize what I call the "liturgical stance" towards various doctrines. The second focuses on the "vested" propositional objects of those attitudes. The third looks at how those doctrines are represented, evoked, and embodied in liturgical contexts. My untimely rallying-cry is that younger philosophers of religion might do well to set aside debates regarding knowledge and justified belief, just as their elders set aside debates regarding religious language. When we set aside knowledge in this way, we make room for dis-

***Note:** This essay has its origins in a talk I gave a decade ago at a conference for "younger, up-and-coming philosophers of religion" at Boston University. The talk contained a lot of sketches and suggestions, and not many arguments, which is why I called it, somewhat ironically, a "manifesto." In the intervening decade, some of the turns I was anticipating (towards practice, "vested" doctrines, and communal practice) have started to take place. I note some of these developments in the [bracketed and italicized] footnotes, but have left the body of the piece largely unchanged, since taking account of the progress over the intervening years would require an entirely different kind of contribution. So it remains a manifesto, albeit now an "untimely" one.

I am grateful to M. David Eckel and his colleagues at the Boston Institute for Philosophy and Religion for the invitation to think about this topic back then, and to Eckel, Allen Speight, Troy DuJardin, and *Boston Studies in Religion, Philosophy, and Public Life* for inviting me to revisit the essay for the present volume.

I dedicate it to Marilyn McCord Adams, whose (also untimely) death in 2017 deprived many of us of a beloved teacher, mentor, exemplar, and friend. Marilyn embodied the liturgical turn in philosophy of religion about as well as anyone could. *Gratias tibi ago.*

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cussions of faith that in turn shed light on neglected but philosophically-interesting aspects of lived religious practice.

Keywords Liturgy · Ceremony · Sincerity · Philosophy of Religion · Belief · Acceptance · Hope · Kant

6.1 Philosophy of Religion in the Twenty-First Century

Several years ago I attended a panel discussion at the American Philosophical Association: the topic was “Philosophy of Religion in the 21st Century.”¹ Panelists were asked to theorize—or at least speculate—about the path they thought the discipline would take over the present century; they were also asked to make some recommendations of their own. The panel featured three distinguished Anglo-American philosophers of religion; each one a household name for anyone working in the field.

There are a few key things about the panel that I recall now, a few years down the road. The first is that a huge number of people attended the session: many more than I’d expected. The second is that some of the younger people in the audience came with great expectations: these were famous practitioners of the craft who had been at it for a long time, and we were eager to hear their predictions and recommendations. The third is that there was a slight but palpable sense of disappointment among many of those same audience members at the end of the session. The source of this disappointment, according to the brief and wholly unscientific survey that I took afterwards, was that two of the three panelists had predicted and recommended that business would continue more or less as usual. Discussions of the rationality of theistic belief, of the content and coherence of theistic doctrine, of the connection between that sort of theism and ethics, and of the logical and evidential threat posed by evil—according to these two speakers—will and should remain *the* central topics in the field.

To be sure, the panelists did propose some tweaking of the business-as-usual model: the first recommended that we focus less on knowledge and more on *internalist* justification of belief, and in particular on how Bayesian forms of probabilistic reasoning can show that religious belief is often rational. The motive he provided for this was that internalist justification (as opposed to the kind of externalist “warrant” that, together with true belief, makes for knowledge) is precisely the sort of thing that religious practitioners alike really *want and need* in the end—for apologetic purposes as well as personal edification. Externalist reflection on how we might turn out to know something about God—even if we don’t know *that* or *how*

¹ I’ve told bits of this story before (Chignell 2013) but am reproducing it here in more detail since it seemed like the best way to introduce the present topic.

we know it—is less satisfying in these respects: a second-best consolation when internalist justification is not in the offing.

The second panelist's tweaks included the recommendation that the discipline open itself up further to people who are pantheistic, panentheistic, agnostic, atheistic, and so forth, in an effort to deemphasize classical apologetics and promote pluralism and fruitful dialogue.

So why were some audience members disappointed? It's not that they were entirely opposed to internalism about (probabilistic) justification or uninterested in the concept of belief and its connection to religious doctrine. There was also no perceptible aversion to including agnostics, atheists, and those with "alternative" conceptions of God among the ranks of philosophers of religion.² There was some discomfort about the fact that all three of the panelists were Caucasian men. But the main source of unhappiness seemed rather (and again this comes from my very unscientific survey) to stem from the fact that these prognostications and recommendations were symptomatic of a general narrowness-of-focus that often characterizes philosophy of religion in analytic circles. Or, put another way, for many in the audience, the fact that these two prominent and distinguished figures would endorse a business-as-usual future heightened the suspicion that such narrowness is at least an ongoing threat, and that after the impressive flourishing of the past forty years we have now reached a period of scholastic stasis in which familiar problems are hashed out in ever finer detail, but genuinely new directions are difficult to find.

Having noted some general responses to the panel's proceedings, it's worth making a couple of further points about what the first panelist said in particular. The focus on *theistic belief* and its internalist justifications (or externalist warrants for that matter), as well as the various challenges to such belief, is undeniably important and central to the field. There is no doubt that questions regarding the existence and character of God or gods, personal or impersonal, pantheist or panentheist, and the like, are pertinent in almost every world religion, and that it would be valuable to settle some of them once and for all (were that possible). It would also be valuable to settle questions about whether, how, and when someone might justifiably *believe* that there is a deity of one of these sorts, or that there isn't, and how the existence of evil and suffering may or may not challenge that sort of belief.

But while it would be valuable to settle some of these issues if we could, and while the now-retiring 'vanguard' generation of metaphysics-friendly philosophers of religion has made crucial progress towards this goal, I'm tempted to think that any ultimate conclusions would still have little bearing on the situation of many actual religious people as they actually live their traditions. That's because, I

²In fact, I think non-theistic like Graham Oppy, Louise Antony, Jeffrey Stout, and Paul Draper or "alternative-theistic" writers like J.L. Schellenberg, Mark Johnston, Philip Clayton, and Catherine Keller have provided some of the more interesting recent contributions to the field, and that these contributions have been read and appreciated. My sense is that the people who have the hardest time in professional philosophy of religion are those who write confessionally but from 'fringe' movements like Mormonism, Pentecostalism, Adventism, Swedenborgianism, Falun Gong, and so on.

suspect, many religious people do not often have the attitude of full *belief* with respect to many doctrines that characterize the traditions of which they are a part. I also suspect that many members of the average church, synagogue, temple, or mosque understandably will not have a maximally clear sense of *what it is* that they are supposed to believe (example: are Christians supposed to *believe* the doctrine of Ascension? What would that amount to in a contemporary cosmology?). And even when people do believe and clearly understand the doctrines, I doubt that many do so in an internalistically justified way.³

If the suspicions I've just aired are correct, then questions about *belief* and its justification, while still deserving a place in our discussion, threaten to be incomplete in at least two ways: first, they respond to the largely academic interest we have in sketching a regulative (and possibly western) ideal—the ideal of someone who firmly and muscularly *believes* that God exists, say, and does so in a way that is clearly internalistically justified. It is largely academic, I am suggesting, not only because that sort of justification is hard to come by, but because not many actual religious people—outside of a few epistemological saints, perhaps⁴—seem to have such firm belief or knowledge.

Second, although the first distinguished member of the APA panel is an important exception,⁵ those who advise us to focus on the justification of theistic belief often recommend that we ignore the thick and messy content of actual religious attitudes and doctrines in order to isolate the “bare” theistic doctrines shared by most major monotheisms and henotheisms—doctrines whose content is clear and whose justification is easier to establish. This serves a purpose when confronting people like J.L. Mackie who argue that even bare theism is incoherent and thus “miraculous” (Mackie 1983). But it too is a useful theoretical abstraction, since even when monotheists and henotheists do have genuine beliefs, it is unlikely that they are restricted to “bare” versions of their doctrines (a possible exception here would be self-conscious deists like Thomas Jefferson).

The two abstractions complement each other: by narrowing its doctrinal focus to bare theism for much of the past forty years, philosophy of religion has been able to isolate and deal with questions about belief and knowledge in an increasingly sophisticated way. We now have a pretty good sense of the various conceptions of justification, warrant, entitlement, reliability, epistemic virtue, “special K,”⁶ etc. as

³In many non-western traditions, belief and doctrine obviously do not play the central role that they are thought to play in western monotheistic traditions. If that's right, then the point I am making here may be even more relevant in e.g. the Shinto, Taoist, Confucian, Jain, and Buddhist contexts. On the other hand, there may also be traditions and global contexts where belief comes much more easily, and religion is more doxastically vibrant (for better and for worse). For a seminal discussion of the Indian tradition on this issue, see Griffiths (1990).

⁴See Chignell (2002).

⁵The first panelist actually included as part of his tweak of the business-as-usual model that we move on to discussing Bayesian justifications for specific Christian doctrines such as Incarnation and Resurrection. It will now be clear to many readers who that panelist was.

⁶This is Stephen Wykstra's neologism for whatever quantity or quality it is that turns true belief into knowledge (he doesn't like the term “warrant” for various reasons).

well as their various sources and conditions. And, again, there is no doubt that forty or fifty years ago, when the climate in academic philosophy was much more hostile to metaphysics and religion, this was exactly the right place to begin. Still, a byproduct of this is that we have circumscribed our philosophical sense of what lived religious *faith* actually is—and the resources on which such faith draws in coping with various theoretical and practical challenges—to the point where our discussion sometimes borders on real-world irrelevance.

Returning once again to the APA panel: I mentioned that there was a third panelist—actually he was, if I recall correctly, the commentator on the other two talks. This panelist discussed the business-as-usual model and recommended certain aspects of it as well as a few tweaks. But at some point in his remarks he added, almost as an aside, that he thought that a new and profitable turn that philosophy of religion might take is towards an engagement with the liturgies of various real-world traditions. Under questioning later, the panelist declined to elaborate, saying that it was just a kind of hunch that he had, and that “it’s up to you all”—gesturing at the then-younger scholars in the room—to figure out what it might involve.⁷

I was provoked by this remark, and have reflected on it occasionally over the intervening years. So when I was asked to contribute a paper to this collection, I decided to take the opportunity to reflect a bit more on what a liturgical or liturgically-oriented approach to philosophy of religion might be. My goal in what remains is to sketch three main aspects of what I will call “liturgical philosophy of religion”—three ways in which philosophers of religion can focus less on the idealized case of justified bare theistic belief, and more on the *philosophically-significant aspects of religious adherence as it is grounded, modeled, and inculcated in communal ceremonies and related practices*. The approach I’m describing is aptly called “liturgical,” then, not because it involves philosophers themselves engaging in liturgies or rituals when reflecting on relevant topics (although I do think we have our own rituals—at conferences and job-talks, say). Rather, it is “liturgical” because it looks to real-world religious practice—and especially the sort of practice that goes on in group services (*leitourgia*)—to broaden the focus of our theorizing about religious attitudes, doctrines, actions, and the ways we represent them. Note: I mean “liturgical” extremely broadly here: a lot of people in “low church” contexts won’t think of themselves as “liturgical-types,” but of course do engage in corporate religious practices and rituals that could easily fit in here. Further, as we’ll see below, liturgical philosophy of religion may not even be *strictly* about the communal: an individual’s adherence and practice can be liturgically-informed and inflected, even when she is on her own.

A key part of the method sketched here involves generating an account of what it is to take a “liturgical stance” towards a doctrine. Participating in a religious service or liturgy in a way that goes beyond just observing—or vaguely following along out of mindless habit or because your family drags you out to synagogue,

⁷ [2020 update: In fact he did not leave it “up to you all” in the end, and in 2018 published a substantial monograph on the philosophy of liturgy. It will now be clear who that panelist was as well.]

church, or mosque on the holidays—involves taking some form of this stance towards what is being said and done. Paradigmatically, this stance is something that religious communities take up together. Once learned, however, individuals can also take it up alone.

In the next section, I discuss the propositional *attitudes* that characterize the liturgical stance, and suggest that talk of belief will often be inadequate. One key set of questions has to do with the other sorts of attitudes that can be involved in the stance; another has to do with the logical and psychological relations between those attitudes. In Sect. 6.3, I look at the propositional *objects* of those attitudes and how we might philosophize about them in ways that are liturgically informed. I also briefly consider whether morally objectionable doctrines are the proper object of the liturgical stance, or whether there are some historical doctrines that we should simply refuse to engage, even insincerely. Finally, in Sect. 6.4, I'll gesture at how philosophers might think about how these “vested” doctrines are *represented and evoked* in liturgical contexts.

Obviously, the scope of the discussion here is limited, since I only have space to discuss our liturgical relationships to propositions. There is much more to say, for instance, about the way that services and communal practices relate to *concrete* entities: persons, material objects, artistic performances, memories, and so on. There is also, obviously, more to say about the *actions* involved in taking up and maintaining the liturgical stance.

6.2 Liturgical Attitudes

Here are some paradigmatic examples of liturgical action in religious contexts: kneeling on a carpet and praying towards Mecca, taking a vow of chastity, kissing an icon, participating in a Passover seder, performing a ceremonial cleansing in the Ganges, eating a wafer out of the fingers of a priest. There are also liturgical actions in non-religious contexts: singing a team's anthem, bowing to a martial arts teacher, saluting a flag. I leave open, for present purposes, whether liturgical actions in non-religious contexts involve taking the liturgical stance that I'm about to describe, although I suspect they sometimes do. Finally, there are “liturgical” actions that an individual performs alone, but as a result of, or in an effort to stay connected to, the actions of a larger group. Examples include performing a seder alone during a quarantine, taking a private vow of chastity in preparation for joining an order, or praying towards Mecca at certain times each day in the knowledge that others are doing the same.

Taking the liturgical stance, as I'm conceiving of it here, often involves a kind of teleological insincerity—“insincerity upwards,” so to speak. Such insincerity comes in degrees, as is illustrated by the following Ladder:

The Ladder of Liturgical Sincerity

- On the bottom and most insincere (but still “upwards”-oriented) rung is the *inquirer* who performs liturgical actions simply because he wants to *understand what it is like* to be a member of the relevant faith-community—i.e., to understand what it is like to say those things and make those individual and collective movements. A participant like this need not believe the doctrines or even mean to assert them when he mouths them; indeed, he might self-consciously suspend judgment or even believe their negations. (Certain efforts in journalism and participant-observer anthropology might also be included on this rung.)
- On the next rung up the ladder, the *discerner* is not just seeking what-it-is-like understanding, but also trying to figure out whether she wants to join the group. This is what motivates the performance of the actions and the making of the assertions that partially constitute group-membership. There is a sincere desire to discern, but an insincerity in the actions and utterances.
- Another rung up is the *conditional seeker* -- someone who is really giving it a try, who doesn't yet believe in (for example) God's existence but wants to be part of the group, and who thinks that *if* God exists, then he is in fact praising God, or thanking God, etc., and that this would be a good and fitting thing to do.
- Close to the top rung on ladder of teleological insincerity is the *initiate* who decides (for e.g. pragmatic or moral reasons) that she *accepts*, and is thus participating in liturgies (saying the shema, performing the hajj, taking holy water) in an effort to move “upwards” into genuine belief, at least with respect to some doctrines. This is the sort of “fake it to make it” posture that Pascal made famous. (Note: I'll say more about belief and acceptance in Sect. 6.2.1 and 6.2.2.)
- There are numerous rungs in between, but at the very top of the ladder we find the *utterly convinced*. This is someone who entirely inhabits the liturgical stance, and has a steady and sincere belief that the relevant propositions are true. (Note: I will suggest below that such sincerity is not always a good thing.)⁸

Switching from Pascal to Wittgenstein, we can say that these different modes of teleological insincerity are different ways of exploring the grammar of a certain language—speaking it along with others in order to see how it fits with one's own. Every religious tradition I know of allows for such grammatical experimentation by inquirers, discerners, seekers, and initiates, and most concede that such teleological insincerity characterizes many established members of the community as well. The suspicions I was articulating earlier, then, could be restated this way: although there may be many *native* speakers of these religious languages, there are not many *fluent* ones. Completely “making it” into utterly convinced sincerity in liturgical practice is hard to achieve – even for those who grew up in the tradition. Indeed, many life-long religious practioners still inhabit the space of “insincerity upwards,” somewhere between the initiate and the utterly convinced.

⁸Thanks to Keith DeRose for discussion of these degrees of sincerity. [2020 update: For DeRose's own efforts to explain and defend the “suspicion that hardly anyone, if anyone at all, knows whether God exists,” see his (2018).]

It is crucial to note, however, that the Ladder is not a rank ordering of virtue: the fact that almost everyone is a little bit insincere and does not make it to the top rung in every engagement is salutary given some of the doctrines involved. For example, I suspect that many Catholics, Episcopalians, and Lutherans who say the Nicene Creed in a liturgy do not really *believe* propositions about, say, the Virgin Birth or the Ascension, and wouldn't want to if they could.⁹ They may utter them, and perhaps even accept them, but be content all the same not to believe them. More significantly, I think it is *morally* preferable on the whole that people in the Reformed tradition *not* be utterly convinced about some of the nastier bits of the Belgic Confession or the Canons of Dort (about the doctrine of reprobation and the “enormities” of the Anabaptists); this is true even if they utter them in liturgical contexts. It likewise seems preferable for Muslims not to assent in full sincerity to the (alleged) injunctions in the Koran to “combat” (*Qital*) those who oppose them, and for male Jews not to be fully sincere if they utter the daily prayer thanking God that they were not born a Gentile, a slave, or a woman.

If something like this picture of the liturgical stance and the Ladder of Sincerity is accurate, then the attitudes that many “believers,” sympathetic agnostics, and even “non-believers” take towards doctrines is far more complicated than talk of belief, partial belief, or degrees of belief suggests. And so a philosophy of religion that takes its cues from liturgical practice will need to go beyond belief to an analysis of the various *other* kinds of attitude—and their justification and defeat conditions—that seem religiously significant. In what follows I will say a bit more about belief and then look at a couple of alternative attitudes that may be involved in religious practice and engagement.

6.2.1 *Belief*

There is more than one way to affirm a proposition – to take it to be true. The two kinds of affirmation I focus on here are *belief* and *acceptance*. Suppose we follow (without any argument¹⁰) the broadly Humean tradition in philosophy that construes belief as *a disposition to feel that a proposition p is true*. It's a *disposition* because not all of our beliefs are occurrent states: there are far too many of them for that.

⁹Again, the doctrine of Ascension is particularly curious in the context of contemporary cosmology – if there were drones or satellite cameras around at the time, what would they have picked up: a flesh and blood body just zooms up into the sky and then... keeps going into outer space? Is vaporized in the stratosphere somewhere? Transmutes into another invisible realm at some point? Even if they can believe in the Resurrection, I'm really not sure what Christians are *supposed* to believe on this score.

¹⁰It is consistent with most of what I say here that belief is *not* the disposition to have a certain feeling, but rather some other kind of disposition to take a proposition to be true. So the Humean flavor of the discussion is incidental, although I myself am inclined towards a Humean view of belief.

(Here consider the plausible locution, “Yes I’d never really thought of it before, but come to think of it I *do* believe that.”)

The *phenomenology* that characterizes (or, if Hume is right, partly constitutes) occurrent belief is hard to describe, in part because it is so familiar. We all know what it is like to have it, though: consider the proposition *that Barack Hussain Obama is the President of the United States*.¹¹ Whatever other feelings this proposition may occasion in you, there is the “vivacious and lively” feeling that is characteristic of belief: consideration of the proposition evokes a kind of internal nod, a kind of yes-phenomenology, you feel impelled towards it, it comes “bathed in the light of truth.” This feeling—if that’s the right way to describe it—is unusual in that it is directed towards a proposition or a state of affairs: items that many metaphysicians will classify as abstract objects. Most of our other feelings, by contrast, are either non-intentional (we just have them and they aren’t really directed towards anything) or they are directed towards concrete objects. But even when non-doxastic feelings *are* directed towards abstract objects—e.g. my feeling terrible about the **fact** *that I failed to keep my promise*, my feeling queasy about the **number** 666, my feeling of pleasure directed towards the **universal** that is a Beethoven symphony¹²—they are often partly *caused* in us by a belief: by the belief that I failed to keep my promise; by the belief about what others have said about the number 666; or by memorial beliefs about particular performances of that symphony.

In sum, the feeling that is characteristic of belief is often at the bottom of, and in any case not reducible to, the many other sorts of feelings and emotions that we have. In light of this, I propose simply to take specifically doxastic feeling as *primitive*: it is that characteristic bottom-level phenomenology you have when occurrently entertaining the proposition that *I am reading a breathless manifesto* or that *Vladimir Putin is the President of the Russian Federation*.¹³ It is different, I want to suggest, from the kind of feeling we often have towards doctrinal propositions when engaged in liturgical practices. The latter is less sensitive to evidence, and often more fleeting – a just-in-the-moment kind of episode that fades away once the liturgy concludes.

This Humean view of belief isn’t essential to the picture I’m sketching here: other models of belief as a primitive sort of “taking to be true” or a “world-to-mind direction of fit” would serve. One advantage of modeling belief in this Humean way, however, is that it makes it vivid that belief isn’t something we can typically *directly* produce in ourselves, simply by trying. Feelings are the sorts of states that come over us, that are caused in us. Sometimes they are responses *to* something: in the belief case, to the presence of what seems like evidence for the truth of a proposition. I can of course *indirectly* generate in myself the feeling that I am at the conference, say, by getting out of bed and going up to campus, finding the conference

¹¹ [2020 update: *Alas that phenomenology has changed quite dramatically.*]

¹² Is that right? Or do we only feel something towards particular instantiations of the symphony?

¹³ I do not take this to entail that *belief* itself is primitive or irreducible. It’s consistent with what I say here about the *feeling* involved in occurrent belief that belief itself be analyzable (i.e. it may involve something other or more than just this doxastic feeling).

room, and so on. But if all my evidence suggests that I am not at a conference, but rather hiking up Cayuga Gorge in the footsteps of Malcolm and Wittgenstein, then I cannot—just by girding up my doxastic loins (so to speak), furrowing my brows, and *trying* really hard—*directly* produce in myself the feeling that I am at the conference in Goldwin Smith Hall. This is what is meant by the familiar dictum that belief is not (or at least not very often¹⁴) under the direct control of the will.

The recognition of this familiar “direct doxastic involuntarist” point leads naturally to questions about the subject-matter of the field that is now called the “ethics of belief.”¹⁵ Most of us agree that praise and blame are appropriate with respect to an act-type only if tokens of that type are under our control in some way. This agreement is presumably based on the intuition that some version of ‘ought-implies-can’ is correct – an intuition as pervasive among compatibilists as it is among incompatibilists about free will. Conversely, if a phenomenon is not (typically) voluntary in at least *some* sense (a sense that may be compatible with determinism), then it is hard to see how we could be genuinely *praiseworthy* or *blameworthy* for having performed it.¹⁶ Many views in the ethics of belief debate, however, presume that there *are* norms governing our various acts and practices of belief-formation, and that some of them are genuinely *moral* norms supporting praise and blame ascriptions. W.K. Clifford articulated his moral norm in this way: “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence” (Clifford 1999, 77). In his response, William James famously scoffed at the stringency of “that delicious *enfant terrible*” (i.e. Clifford), arguing instead for the more liberal policy that we often have the “right to believe” even when we lack sufficient evidence (and even when we *know* that we lack it). In places, James goes further and suggests that in certain contexts, it is not merely permitted but *positively commendable* or even *rationally required* that we “decide a live option” on insufficient evidence.¹⁷ This is particularly true, says James, with respect to religious questions.¹⁸

¹⁴ There may be a few unusual counterexamples to the general principle. See Ginet 2001. More recently, people like Brian Weatherson (2008), Kieran Setiya (2008), and Pamela Hieronymi (2008) have raised different sorts of objections to direct doxastic involuntarism. [2020 update: The number of papers on this topic has exploded over the past decade.]

¹⁵ [2020 update: For an overview, see Chignell (2018).]

¹⁶ See Pereboom (2002) for an argument according to which we could still be *accountable* for it.

¹⁷ Compare James (1956, 11): “Our passionate nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds.”

¹⁸ My favorite passage in *The Will to Believe*: “When I look at the religious question as it really puts itself to concrete men, and when I think of all the possibilities which both practically and theoretically it involves, then this command that we shall put a stopper on our heart, instincts, and courage, and *wait* – acting of course meanwhile more or less as if religion were *not* true – till doomsday, or till such time as our intellect and sense working together may have raked in evidence enough, – this command, I say, seems to me the queerest idol ever manufactured in the philosophic cave” (James 1956, 30).

Given ought-implies-can and the uncontroversial point about belief's typical involuntariness, I think we have to assume that these early ethicists of belief are *either* talking about norms on the *indirect* ways in which we produce belief in ourselves, or not really talking about belief at all. It seems most charitable to Clifford to read him as claiming that there are contexts in which we have a moral duty *indirectly* to produce in ourselves a certain belief—that the ship is safe, say—*by way of* collecting sufficient evidence. In keeping with this, contemporary Cliffordians focus on our responsibility for the *indirect* ways in which our belief-formation and belief-suspension is voluntary and thus susceptible to moral evaluation.¹⁹

James, likewise, can be read as admitting the direct doxastic involuntarist point, and then claiming that in the right contexts we can *indirectly* produce in ourselves beliefs that lack sufficient evidence. If this is right, then he is closer to Pascal than he sometimes lets on.²⁰ Another reading, however, has him shifting our focus away from belief altogether and towards other kinds of propositional attitudes that *are* typically voluntary. What is often referred to as “acceptance” is such a kind, and one in which philosophers of religion have recently started to take an interest.²¹

6.2.2 Acceptance

Acceptance is another way to affirm a proposition – to take it to be true. Acceptance as typically construed (e.g. by Michael Bratman, L. Jonathan Cohen, William Alston, Robert Audi, Edna Ullman-Margalit, Philip Pettit, and, surprisingly enough, Immanuel Kant) is different from belief, but is also more robust than mere assumption-for-the-sake-of-argument. It is a voluntary attitude towards *p*, adopted in certain contexts for broadly practical reasons, and it can motivate assertion that *p*, deliberation on the basis of *p*, and acting-as-if *p*. While there may be some constraints on how *much* evidence we can have against *p* and still rationally accept it, the acceptance itself is partly justified by something other than evidence, and it

¹⁹ See, for example, Wood (2002). Cf. Stocker (1982) and Feldman (2002), esp. p. 675ff.

²⁰ James writes in the *Principles of Psychology* that “those to whom ‘God’ and ‘Duty’ are now mere names can make them much more than that, if they make a little sacrifice to them every day. But all this

is so well known in moral and religious education that I need say no more.” This suggests, in a Pascalian spirit, that he views the “belief” involved in religious faith as something that can be voluntarily produced through inculcation and practice (rather than seeking evidence). See James (1890, 948–949).

²¹ I don’t mean to suggest that there is *no* way to support talk of obligations on direct acts of belief-formation while trying to absorb the involuntarist datum that such acts are not under the direct control of the will. I will set aside discussion of these more complicated positions here. See Feldman (2002) and Adler (2006).

typically lacks the characteristic phenomenology of belief.²² In other words: whereas belief is a state resulting from the perceived presence of sufficient *evidence* for the truth of the proposition (hence on the Humean view it is a disposition to the involuntary “feeling” that the proposition is true), acceptance is an attitude that we take on board for *more* than just epistemic, evidential reasons.²³ Again, my sense is that although he often uses the language of “belief,” it is *not* belief in our sense but rather something like *acceptance* that James—and Kant before him—took to be involved in religious faith and liturgical practice (and in other parts of our lives as well). If that is correct, then these broadly practical pictures of faith might be compatible with Clifford’s view that *belief* is governed by evidentialist norms.²⁴

6.2.3 Hope and Trust

Kant was no fan of liturgy and “priestcraft,” but he did suggest that “What may I hope?” is one of the three great questions in philosophy, and also the one that ought to be addressed in *Religionsphilosophie*.²⁵ He says in his lectures on the topic, as well as in the published *Religion* book itself, that the “minimum of theology” or “minimum of cognition in religion” is the *hope* that God exists and the belief or faith (*Glaube*) that God is really possible (and that *if* God exists, then God endorses the moral law (28:998; 6:153–4 and note)). Some commentators read this as articulating an appealingly low standard for religiosity, since even agnostics and atheists could achieve it. Others view this as articulating an appallingly low standard for religiosity, inadequate to characterize authentic religious faith.²⁶

²² For contemporary accounts of the distinction between (involuntary) “belief” and (voluntary) “acceptance,” see Cohen (1992), Bratman (1992), Ullman-Margalit and Margalit (1992), and Pettit (1998). Not all concepts of acceptance are the same, however. Robert Stalnaker develops a concept of “acceptance” that is much broader than this: it seems quite close to the genus of “positive propositional attitudes,” of which “acceptance” is of course just a species. See ch. 5 of Stalnaker (1984). For discussions of acceptance in a religious context, see Alston (1996) and Audi (2008). [2020 update: *There’s been an explosion of work on this issue, too, including a series of key articles by Howard-Snyder (e.g. 2013). See also Malcolm and Scott (2017), Page (2017), and Audi (2019). For an intriguing view that leaves open whether to assimilate acceptance and outright belief (but not credences), see Bolinger (2020)*]

²³ This is compatible with thinking that acceptance may or must meet *some* limited epistemic conditions.

²⁴ For Kant’s picture, see Chignell (2007) and Chignell (2009). German is tricky, because the word “*Glaube*” can often pick out our concept of belief *or* our concept of faith, depending on context. Interestingly, Kant too uses the language of “acceptance” sometimes, defining “*Annehmung*” in the Dohna-Wundlacken lectures as “a contingent approval that has sufficient ground in regard to a certain purpose” (Kant 1902–, 24:735). [2020 update: *For another articulation of this combination of evidentialism about belief and a practical account of the justification of faith, see Wood 2020.*]

²⁵ [2020 update: *for more on Kant’s views on hope in philosophy of religion, see Chignell (2014) and Wood (2020).*]

²⁶ See the “Introduction” and other contributions to Firestone and Palmquist (eds.), (2006).

Perhaps we can bring these competing perspectives a little closer by suggesting that Kant's point is that rational hope that various doctrines are true (which is what religion adds to pure Kantian morality) requires only one "practico-dogmatic"²⁷ commitment—namely, the acceptance that God's existence is really possible. But a liturgical stance in conjunction with this "minimal" modal commitment may still involve a sophisticated complex of *other* attitudes, desires, virtues, and affections—including hope for extramundane assistance—that would not fit very well within a determinedly atheistic framework. Apart from the modal commitment, perhaps, many of these other states involved in speratic religion won't require the sorts of justification or warrant that epistemologists tend to discuss. At his best, then, Kant provides a new formulation of how to be authentically religious – and how to do philosophy of religion – without worrying so much about what and why we believe.

But if we are going to say that a deep and life-structuring kind of hope is sufficient for authentic religious engagement -- sufficient for occupying an authentic form of the liturgical stance -- we will need an account of hope and of what "deep and life-structuring" means in this context (since clearly hope can also be superficial or even idle). What would it be for a set of religious hopes to structure our lives? Could they do so in the same way that faith (conceived either as belief or as acceptance) does?²⁸ Is deep hope of this sort voluntary in some way? And would such hope involve *other* commitments, beyond the belief or faith that its object is really possible? Finally, does this kind of hope require something like *trust* in some entity (God, nature, history, karma, Fichte's "living moral order")? Can "trust in" be both rational and yet neutral as to whether its object exists?²⁹

I won't try to offer determinate answers to those questions here. My point, rather, is to argue that the epistemologist's favorite propositional attitude—i.e. belief—should not be presumed by philosophers of religion to be the kind of attitude that is most important or even central to religious life on the ground (or in the place of worship). I have also suggested (more controversially) that the attitude that many religious adults take towards many doctrinal propositions is *rarely* that of belief, and even more rarely counts as knowledge. Philosophers tend to be *epistemologists* or *gnosologists*—they are looking for an account of *episteme* (*scientia*, *Wissen*) or perhaps *gnosis* (*cognitio*, *Erkenntnis*). Philosophers of religion have often followed suit. The liturgical turn, however, would involve focusing our efforts on being *pistologists* and *elpistologists*—looking for an account of *pistis* (*fides*, *Glaube*, *faith*) and *elpis* (*spes*, *Hoffnung*, *hope*). It is clearly consistent with hope that *p*, and may be consistent with faith that *p*, that one fails to believe *p* or even believes that *not-p*. (Thus the Biblical exclamation "I believe, help Thou my unbelief!" could be rendered less paradoxically as "I hope and sometimes even accept, help Thou my

²⁷ For this terminology, see the *Real Progress* essay (1902-, 20:305ff).

²⁸ See for instance Jürgen Moltmann's groundbreaking work on hope, starting with his (1964). My sense is that Moltmann conflates hope with expectation in a way that is sometimes misleading. Compare Muyskens (1979). [2020 update: See also Chignell (2014) and (draft).]

²⁹ [2020 update: See McKaughan (2013), Kvanvig (2014); Johnston (2019), Pace and McKaughan, (forthcoming).]

unbelief, assuming that belief would be a good thing in this context!") A liturgical philosophy of religion, then, would go beyond the narrow focus on questions about whether belief is justified (and warranted and safe, etc.), and may even "set aside" belief altogether, in order to make room for something like *acceptance* as a key component of the liturgical stance.³⁰

6.3 Liturgical Objects

So far we have looked at some of the propositional *attitudes* that characterize the liturgical stance, and I have suggested that twenty-first century philosophers of religion could profit from looking more closely at their nature, sources, and justification conditions. In this section I want consider the *objects* of such attitudes—i.e., the doctrinal propositions themselves to which we take up the liturgical stance—and see whether the roles they play in various religious rituals can tell us something about how a liturgical philosopher might best reflect on them.

It is worth noting, first, that there are very few liturgies for "bare theism" (except, perhaps, in certain Unitarian traditions): despite John Hick's massive influence in the pluralism debate, no group has yet formed to write *The Book of Hickean Prayer* in which invocations and petitions are addressed to the thing-in-itself, the Real behind all conventional religious appearances. Rather, most real-world religious rituals involve the invocation of much more *robust* and *specific* religious doctrines. A liturgical philosophy, then, would focus on these "vested" doctrines of extant traditions, rather than the "bare" theological-ethical core that unites two or more religions.³¹ It would also see its goal not in apologetic terms as that of mounting a defense of some doctrine or other and thus trying to make that doctrine as bare as possible in order successfully to complete its mission. Rather, the goal would be to work out the grammar of a sophisticated religious vocabulary in order to promote—primarily—reflective understanding of that vocabulary and—sometimes and only secondarily—a sense of how that vocabulary (and the doctrines it presupposes) becomes psychologically and/or rationally entrenched in certain contexts.

To some extent, the project I'm describing here is similar to or even a part of what is commonly called "philosophical theology." But this has become a contested term in recent years, and so some distinctions might help to clarify the

³⁰ I don't assume here that "acceptance" and "faith" are the same thing in the contemporary context (though I think they are in the Kantian context). In effect the debate about the doxastic, non-doxastic, and other attitudes and dispositions involved in the liturgical stance is a debate about what *faith* might be, and how it relates to various principles of rational engagement and attitude-formation. [2020 update: For a summary of recent developments, see Buchak ([forthcoming](#))].

³¹ In the effort to focus on "thick" doctrines as opposed to "thin" or "bare" theism, I take myself to be following Marilyn McCord Adams's example in (1999) and (2006). See also Johnston (2011) on the idolatry of "thin, generic theism."

recommendation I'm making. One thing that liturgical philosophy of religion might involve is simply

- (1) Good old-fashioned conceptual analysis applied to “vested,” robust concepts and doctrines of religious significance.

Few philosophers in the post-Quinean context are optimistic about the prospects of *pure* conceptual or ordinary language analysis, however, and so liturgical philosophy would need to go beyond (1) if it is to avoid seeming like a massive throw-back. Fortunately, there are other candidates:

- (2) The use of the characteristic tools of analytic philosophy³² to mount arguments involving vested religious concepts and doctrines. These tools include: logical apparatuses of various sorts (deductive, probabilistic, modal, deontic, etc.); abduction; rational intuition; thought-experiment; reflective equilibrium; appeal to substantive theory-building constraints such as simplicity, elegance, and explanatory depth; rigor, clarity, and rhetorical understatement; shyness regarding grand sweeping narratives, and, of course, necessary-and-sufficient-conditions analysis of our concepts, refined by appeal to often-outlandish counterexamples.

The problem with (2) is that it is hard to distinguish it from everything else that falls under the rubric of “philosophical theology.” So while (2) is consistent with the sort of liturgical philosophy I'm recommending here, or even an important component of it, it can't be the whole thing, for fear of losing our topic.

A third candidate is

- (3) The use of principled appeals to collective religious sources—viz., revelation to a group, public testimony from religious authorities, communal tradition, liturgical canons, and corporate ceremonial experience—in order to
- (a) supply topics and direct inquiry;
 - (b) supply *prima facie* non-epistemic justification;
 - (c) see whether and how attitudes (perhaps even some beliefs) that are *prima facie* justified on other grounds might be challenged by input from these sources; and
 - (d) better understand what it is like to be somewhere on the Ladder of Liturgical Sincerity with respect to such doctrines.

Note, first, that according to (a) these “special religious sources” can supply topics for philosophical reflection. One of the main things a liturgical philosopher might do is pay close attention to the practices of a given group and try to reconstruct the metaphysical and epistemological commitments they presuppose. What sorts of commitments or doctrines would make sense of the act of venerating an icon or taking a vow of obedience?³³ After making these explicit, she might then go on to criticize those commitments on ethical or philosophical grounds, or seek to make them coherent with other commitments at the heart of the relevant tradition.

³²I do not mean to suggest that these tools are the sole possession of analytic philosophers, obviously.

³³[2020 update: Here see Wolterstorff 2015.]

This leads to (b) and (c): the appeal to collective religious sources can offer a kind of justification for religious attitudes. For example: suppose that the doctrine that the universe is the result of emanation rather than either creation or chance is one for which a person has little or no justification. But suppose he then recognizes that the emanation doctrine is a part of the scriptural and communal tradition into which he has taken up the liturgical stance. Other things equal, that recognition may supply the doctrine with some further justification for him – albeit of a *non*-epistemic sort that supports insincere forms of teleological engagement (hope, acceptance, etc.).

Conversely, someone else may have plenty of ordinary, epistemic justification for the commonsense belief that each person is a unique being. But this belief is (at least) psychologically challenged when she realizes that a central, settled doctrine of her ecclesiastical tradition is that at least one being comprises three different persons. Perhaps this realization reduces the strength of her credence or causes her to suspend, even though it hasn't taken away any evidence. Or perhaps she realizes that she never had first-person evidence for the belief in the first place and that it was justified on testimony that she now has reason to question. Or perhaps she continues to hold the belief and at the same time adopts the acceptance that a unique being can somehow be three different persons (and also the hope that her belief will somehow subside?). Hope and even acceptance that *not-p* in such a case may be both psychologically and rationally compatible with belief that *p*. Indeed, I think that in liturgical engagement contexts, this will be a fairly common noetic configuration – towards the top of our Ladder, but still not on the top rung.

Note that (3) *does* clearly distinguish this kind of liturgical philosophy from natural theology, granting (as is customary) that the latter does not properly make appeals to these kinds of special religious sources. In other words, natural theology involves arguments about religiously relevant philosophical issues, but these arguments are constructed in such a way that, ideally, others will be able to feel their probative force on the basis of what Kant would call “mere reason.”³⁴ Liturgical philosophy in the mode of (3), by contrast, appeals to sources of topics and (non-epistemic) justification that go well beyond our collective heritage as rational beings with the usual complement of cognitive faculties. It can be engaged experimentally by inquirers who have no commitments of their own on the matter, or more confessionally by people who are or want to be practicing members of the tradition in question.

(3) contains hints about how we can distinguish liturgical philosophy from other species of revealed theology. One paradigmatically philosophical feature of (3) is that it uses appeals to special religious sources that are “principled” – and strives to formulate those principles as explicitly as possible. Doing so will presumably require the use of the philosophical tools that are mentioned in (2), tools that aren't

³⁴ [Updated 2020: See Chignell/Pereboom (2020) and Kolb/Chignell (2020).]

as often employed by biblical and systematic theologians.³⁵ A related feature of this approach is that the *concepts* involved in the relevant attitudes would be clarified, analyzed, and sometimes adjusted using the tools in (2). This means that (3) is not only compatible with, but also typically involves (2). And of course (2) often requires (1), given that conceptual analysis (insofar as it is possible) is one of the well-honed tools of philosophy. This merging of our three candidates into one is welcome, and something like the conjunction of (1)–(3) is what I am trying to recommend here as part of the liturgical turn in philosophy of religion. But (3) is really its hallmark.

When philosophers *have* dealt with classical, vested theological loci (for example, in the Christian tradition: Trinity, Incarnation, Atonement etc.) they have often merely started with some rather blasé formulation of the doctrine and then chipped away at it with the tools of analytic philosophy in order to show that it can be made coherent (or not) on some contemporary metaphysical scheme. But (3) includes appeals to sacred texts, oral and bodily traditions, authorities of various sorts, and the communal muscle memory embodied in ceremonies *not* just in order to get the doctrine squarely in front of us, but *also* to have a sense of its history, context, and origins. (People in sociology and cultural studies have been much better than philosophers at this sort of historicizing, contextualizing project (see e.g. Luhmann 2012)). The goal of liturgical philosophy of religion, then, would be to focus on vested doctrines rather than denuded theism, and to valorize philosophical clarity and precision without at the same time ignoring context, history, materiality, and tradition.³⁶

A final key point: none of this is intended to suggest that communal practice or liturgy is *unassailable*. Indeed, part of the liturgical turn could involve (following Kant once again and) focusing on places where philosophical considerations might appropriately challenge a liturgical practice or our understanding thereof. To take an extreme and obvious example: the fact that human or animal sacrifice is part of a tradition's ceremonial practice does not defeat the overwhelming moral and theological reasons that *practitioners*, along with everyone else, have to shun it. The same might be true regarding the liturgical utterance of certain historical creeds and prayers. It would be wrong, for instance, to participate in the ceremonies of a

³⁵I am not suggesting that systematic theologians do not make principled appeals to collective religious sources, nor am I suggesting that they make unprincipled appeals to such sources. The point is rather one of emphasis: in the liturgical philosophy of religion, a premium would be placed on making explicit precisely how it is that the deliverances of “collective religious sources” can increase or decrease our justification for taking certain attitudes towards a doctrine.

³⁶Marilyn McCord Adams (1999) utilizes these three different kinds of tools in an effort to response to what she calls the “concrete logical problem” of horrendous evil. More specifically, she invokes some of the vested doctrines (ontological and axiological) of the Christian tradition to generate scenarios that show how it is logically possible for horrendous evils to be defeated within the individual life and perspective of a victim or perpetrator. She also demonstrates (in Adams 2008) how practices of prayer might lead us to focus in hope on those possibilities.

Christian Identity group, even if you don't believe any of their racist doctrines. Likewise, it is at least up for grabs (and an interesting item of debate for liturgical philosophers of religion) whether it is permissible to non-doxastically utter the Orthodox Jewish prayer: "Blessed are you, HaShem, King of the Universe, for not having made me a woman."

6.4 Philosophy of the Liturgy

I've discussed some of the central attitudes that characterize the liturgical stance, as well as some of the propositional objects of that liturgical attitude and how we might philosophically handle them. It remains now to sketch some ways in which philosophers of religion might look to actual liturgical practices in various religious traditions to find out *how* such vested doctrines are made into objects of possible acceptance.

Religious ritual has been closely studied across various fields: anthropology, sociology, literary theory, cultural studies, religious studies, and even theology.³⁷ But few trained philosophers have looked closely at the relevant phenomena, even philosophers of religion.³⁸ This is regrettable, since not only the attitudes involved in the liturgical stance, and not only the vested objects of those attitudes, but also the *apparatuses* used by those who take that stance—iconography, symbol, metaphor, gesture—can have philosophical significance and be worthy of philosophical reflection and analysis. Social philosophers, for instance, might be able to provide new and deeper understandings of how ritual allows practitioners to represent religious doctrines, invest them with meaning, remember them collectively, and perform (as well as motivate) their acceptance of them. Philosophers working close to cognitive science and psychology might be able to discern how certain 'priming' events (including various liturgical sounds, aromas, and gestures) can lead religious people to interpret and interact with their surroundings in a particular way or even to form certain religious attitudes or 'intuitions.' Philosophy of literature and art might examine ways in which the tools, texts, and objects of ceremonial practice allow for

³⁷ In theology, the seminal sources are Bell (1992), (1997) and Pickstock (1998). These texts would presumably be important touchstones for work on the philosophy of liturgy.

³⁸ [2020 update: As noted earlier, Wolterstorff has now published a book on the matter (2018), following other studies by Bruce Benson (2013) and (Wolterstorff's student) Terence Cuneo (2016). James K.A. Smith has published a trilogy of popular books on "Cultural Liturgies" (2009–2017); Michael Scott has reinvigorated the discussion of religious language (partly in liturgical contexts) in a series of articles (including 2017); Claire Carlisle has developed a sophisticated theory of religious habit as part of liturgical practice (see her 2013); and Mark Wynn works in the phenomenology of religious practice in, for example, certain architectural spaces (see his 2011 and 2013).]

the *Versinnlichung* (“sensible rendering” – a Kantian term) of ideas whose objects, strictly speaking, are beyond the bounds of possible experience.³⁹

Finally, in some contexts it will be fruitful to reverse the order of explanation and ask how the endorsement of a specific doctrine (the Buddhist no-self doctrine, for instance) both shapes and explains certain liturgical practices (see e.g. Collins 1990). This might lead to interesting debates about when the doctrine, as opposed to the liturgy, is in the theoretical driver’s seat, so to speak.

Nietzsche writes in the *Genealogy of Morals* that “The more abstract a truth you want to teach, the more you must seduce the senses to it.” The idea I’ve been merely sketching in this last section is that a liturgical turn in philosophy of religion might lead us to reflect not only on the abstract truths taught by catechism and creed, but also on how they “seduce the senses” in the context of religious ceremony and corporate practice.

6.5 Conclusion

Philosophy of religion in the twenty-first century is and will be an increasingly global enterprise. Because of the vast differences in religious doctrine and practice amongst various peoples and philosophers, there will inevitably be an urge to continue focusing on the justification of doctrines involving “bare” concepts (God, the Real, the sacred, the transcendent) —doctrines that are viewed as unifying threads between diverse traditions. Although the urge is not a bad one, I have suggested here that it threatens to leave us with a philosophy that is about (i) attitudes that many religious people do not often have towards (ii) doctrines that most traditions would deem woefully denuded, for the sake of (iii) making claims to a kind of justification that few of us ever possess.

A liturgical turn in the philosophy of religion would offer a corrective to all of this abstraction by urging that we *also* apply philosophical tools to the “vested” doctrines present in the words and actions of real-world liturgical practice, and analyze the way these practices model, symbolize, picture, and act out those doctrines in a way that makes them viable objects of substantial religious attitudes. These vested doctrines (rather than those of bare theism) are what religious people actually hope for or accept (rather than believe, oftentimes), and the decision to engage them liturgically is typically part of what leads to (or even constitutes) the formation of

³⁹“*Versinnlichung*” (“sensible rendering”) is Kant’s term in the *Critique of Judgment* for what beautiful art and nature can do with respect to the transcendental ideas of uncognizable supersensibles (see Kant 1902–, 5:356.) In *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone* he notes that “we always need a certain analogy with natural being in order to make supersensible characteristics comprehensible to us” (1902–, 6:65n). And in a striking comment in a lecture on anthropology, Kant says of the arts what he might just as well say of religious ceremony: “The entire utility of the beautiful arts is that they set ... propositions of reason in their full glory and powerfully support them” (1902–, 25:33).

such attitudes. Finally, a liturgical philosophy of religion would keep in mind the checkered history of these doctrines and their representation in the life of particular communities, thus allowing us better to grasp not just the theoretical meaning of the doctrines, but also what it practically means to live by (or reject) them.⁴⁰

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Chapter 7

Belief that Matters: Religion, Anti-Black Racism and the Future of the Philosophy of Religion



Elizabeth Pritchard

Abstract The category of “belief” has been at the forefront of the philosophy of religion. Nonetheless, a number of scholars of religion have recently repudiated the category of “belief” as exclusively cognitive, and as such, yielding a reductionist and distorted view of religions. The problem with this conclusion is that it takes for granted that belief is nonmaterial. I argue that this presumption contributes to the disaggregation of “religion” and “race,” the obfuscation of Christianity’s relationship to racism and the perpetuation of American anti-black racism. In what follows, I make a case for the materiality of belief, outline the interests that drove its dematerialization, and articulate the stakes of continuing to presume that belief consists in a mental state of affirmation. To make this case, I draw from recent works which both portray American anti-black racism as a religion and offer a materialist interpretation of belief that resonate with and substantiate lesser known theories of belief from a range of disciplines. I conclude by reflecting on the implications of this argument for a revised “ethics of belief” for the philosophy of religion.

Keywords Belief · Racism · Philosophy of religion · Materiality · Ethics of belief

7.1 Introduction

The analysis that follows heeds the calls recently delivered by Tal Lewis and Kevin Schilbrack for a revamped philosophy of religion. Schilbrack writes that philosophy of religion “ought to evolve from its primary present focus on the rationality of traditional theism to become a fully global form of critical reflection on religions in all their variety and dimensions, in conversation with other branches of philosophy and other disciplines in the academic study of religions” (Schilbrack 2014, xi). Lewis has written, “[P]hilosophy of religion should be conceived less in terms of a fixed set of

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questions than in terms of philosophical modes of analysis of a range of questions and topics generated by both the study of particular religions and by the process of studying religion itself" (Lewis 2016, 6; italics in original). For Schilbrack and Lewis, philosophy of religion has become an academic cul-de-sac specializing in a restricted set of topics applied explicitly or implicitly to Christian theism. It is in danger of becoming irrelevant unless it can apply its characteristic habits of rigor and suspicion to a far more capacious set of issues and traditions and can enter into conversations with colleagues who apply diverse methods and perspectives to the study of religion.

I suggest that a reinvention of the philosophy of religion begin by revisiting one of its most familiar topics. This topic is "belief." As Schilbrack declares, "the concept of belief has been absolutely central to the discipline of philosophy of religion. It is possible that no other concept has been more so" (55). I grant that it appears unlikely that an analysis of belief heralds the revitalization of the philosophy of religion. Indeed, a number of recent works reflecting different methodological approaches to the study of religion have insisted that the emphasis upon belief in both popular and scholarly renderings of religion is deeply misleading. Robert Orsi, scholar of American Catholicism, has remarked that belief is the "wrong question" to ask about religion (Orsi 2005, 18). Orsi joins a number of critics who point out that the focus on belief, *qua* inner convictions, reflects a Protestant hegemony that alternately obscures or denigrates the manifold material elements, power axes and communal relationships that constitute religions (Asad 2003, 199, 2012, 40; Bender and Taves 2012, 14; Keane 2007, 29; Lopez 1998, 28; Lofton 2012). This critique is linked to a broader materialist turn in religious studies, whose advocates insist that we abandon decidedly nonmaterial belief.¹ Other scholars, sympathetic to this materialist critique, nonetheless argue that "belief" must be retained if we hope to reliably distinguish specifically "religious" behavior. They point to the long-term usage of "belief" on the part of adherents and scholars as well as to the fact that "belief" signifies the hidden commerce that takes place between humans and spiritual entities. In the absence of adherents' recourse to talk of their beliefs, they claim that scholars would not be able to pick out specifically religious behavior in the midst of all sorts of mundane transactions (Wiebe 1979; Godlove 2002).

I find myself dissatisfied with both of these positions. Both positions presume belief is fundamentally non-material. Moreover, the conclusion that belief's centrality is attributable to a hegemonic Protestantism fails to do justice to the diversity and complexity of Protestantism and fails to engage broader historical trends and material interests that might drive such a construction of belief and religion. I am also not convinced that it is imperative or feasible to cleanly demarcate certain activities, feelings or beliefs as "religious." Such a demarcation risks the distortion of various cultural and historical contexts as well as the justification of objectionable practices and convictions through recourse to the claim of "sincerely held religious beliefs."

¹ See Vásquez (2011). Vásquez's materialism is, he insists, non-reductive. By "materialist," Vásquez is referring to "lived religion," that is, religion that is temporal, contextual, situated, interested, though the various aspects of religion (discourses, practices and institutions) may very well represent themselves as eternal or transcendent.

Thus, rather than jettison immediately the category of “belief” or cordon off its peculiarly religious features, I suggest we examine the interests that drive the presumption that belief is entirely psychological and is, as such, synonymous with “religion.” As I will note, these interests are varied and serve divergent ends. Nonetheless, in this essay, I focus attention on how this presumption disaggregates “religion” and “race,” obscures Christianity’s relationship to racism and perpetuates American anti-black racism.

I contend that an examination of “belief” in relation to racism contributes to the reinvigoration of the philosophy of religion. First, the unexpected juxtaposition of religion and race subverts conventional categorical distinctions and compels a philosophical analysis of concepts to take up historical and sociological considerations. Second, the violence and injustice of racist beliefs challenges the premium placed on rationality in the “ethics of belief”—a subfield within the philosophy of religion. This subfield generally focuses on the voluntaristic, epistemological and evidentiary character of belief formation.² Advocates of the relevance and significance of the ethics of belief note the high cost of irresponsible beliefs; their proposed remedy is better *informed* belief or more judicious belief formation (what has been referred to as “cognitive hygiene”) on the part of individuals.³ This remedy retains the presumption that beliefs are essentially cognitive and readily corrected with access and attention to evidence. I suggest, however, that the persistence of racism despite explicit disavowals of racist beliefs urges a reevaluation of the relationship between beliefs and entrenched practices as well as a reformulation of the criterion of ethical belief.

In what follows, I first discuss several recent works of American history which describe anti-black racism as an American religion. Their arguments throw into relief the stakes of presuming the immateriality of belief and lend credence to several lesser known materialist theories of belief from a range of disciplines. In the second portion of the essay, I offer an analysis of what I take to be a modern dematerialization of religious belief and the consequent obscuring of the relationship between “religion” (specifically Christianity) and “race.” Finally, I comment on the implications of this analysis for the philosophy of religion and specifically, the “ethics of belief.”

7.2 The American Religion of Racism

In her ground-breaking work, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness*, Michelle Alexander writes, “White supremacy, over time, became a religion of sorts” (2010, 26). Alexander does not elaborate on this contention, but two more recent works provide expansive commentary. In their book, *Racecraft*:

² See, for instance, W. K. Clifford (1876, -77), Nicholas Wolterstorff (1996), Locke (1975, Book IV, chap. XVI, chap. XVII, para. 24, chap. XIX), and Van Harvey (1969, 42, 2008, 40).

³ See, for instance, Lawrence Torcello (2016, esp. 31); Torcello refers to S.F. Aiken and R.B. Talise *Why We Argue (And How We Should): A Guide to Political Disagreement* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

The Soul of Inequality, historian Barbara Fields and anthropologist Karen Fields declare that racecraft is “the old-time religion” (2014, 290). In Ta-Nehisi Coates’ letter to his son *Between the World and Me*, he, too, portrays white supremacy as casting the powerful spell of a full-fledged religion: “I would like to tell you that such a day approaches when the people who *believe* themselves to be white renounce this demon religion and begin to think of themselves as humans” (Coates 2015). Why do these authors identify racism as a religion? Is it not the case that white supremacy in America is not a mere belief, but is all too real? And how would one go about dissenting from belief in the supremacy of whiteness?

Racism, a term which comes into use in the United States in the 1930s (Sollors 2002, 98), is defined in several dictionaries as a belief, specifically a belief in the superiority of one race over others. Racism may be condemned as a false, misinformed or malevolent *belief* even as the existence of various races of humans is regarded as *fact*.⁴ For the Fields, there are two problems with this presupposition. First, the existence of races is a belief and not an incontrovertible fact. There is no scientific basis for segmenting humans by distinct patterns of genetic sequences. The Fields see belief in race as justifying political and economic interests that entail exploitation of and violence done to some bodies as opposed to others. They argue that belief in race took hold in an American colonial context that combined high demand for profit-producing labor with armed rebellions of men demanding the same rights as fellow Englishmen.

Second, the Fields complicate the relationship between racism and belief and challenge conventional notions of belief. As the Fields reason: “*Racism* is not an emotion or state of mind, such as intolerance, bigotry, hatred, or malevolence. If it were that, it would easily be overwhelmed” (17). Racism will not be dismantled by more accurate information or by converting minds and hearts. According to the Fields, race is a belief and racism “those rituals that daily create and re-create race” (115). The resultant charged circuitry is what they call “racecraft.” The “craft” in racecraft signals the making or doing which accompanies “the socially ratified belief that travels *before and after it, as input and output*” (203). The point is that while belief and action are associated with various binaries: spiritual/material, mind/body and inward/outward that are analytically distinguishable, their relationship is undeniably dialectical. Indeed, it can be difficult to determine the starting point of their interosculation. At points it seems like action follows belief, yet at other points the order is reversed: “the action and imagining inextricably intertwined. The *outcome* is a *belief*” that appears as a “vivid truth” (19, italics added). The Fields insist that racism is first and foremost a social practice, which means that it is “an action and rationale for action, or both at once.”

The Fields’ description of the mutual constitution of belief and action is not so far from that of Max Weber who argued that Calvin and his followers did not just insist upon the need for a faith that yielded objective results or “fruit,” but that such fruit or works were the signs of, indeed the very constitution or fabrication of,

⁴It is the perception as to the facticity of race that prompts scientists to examine the genetic factors for African American women’s higher death rates from breast cancer (Victor 2016).

conviction (Weber 2001, 68–69, 90, 104). Religious communities do not simply compose and profess a set of beliefs. They substantiate, validate and mobilize them through the materiality of embodiment and relationship. A belief is neither simply a psychic attitude nor a proposition, then, but is caught up in a relational *practice*. Various groupings solicit, produce and circulate belief and in the process produce themselves, qua “believers.” In other words, it is not simply a matter of religious communities producing and holding beliefs, but beliefs producing communities. Making a similar point, Michel de Certeau contends that no one believes alone, but on the basis of others and their reports; it is this plurality that serves as the guarantee for the investment (1985, 201–202). He insists that believing is “a ‘network’ of recognition a ‘spider’s web’ organizing a social fabric.... [It is an] insurance system ... a credibility network” (194, 195). Belief is a spoken or unspoken pledge of loyalty; it is an economy of exchange with credit extended only to those who are affiliated. De Certeau’s rendering, in turn, evokes that of Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Smith’s analysis of belief also emphasizes the relationality signified by belief. Smith painstakingly reproduces the historical constellation of terms associated with “belief” (*credo, pistis, fides, believe*), noting that these terms signify a relationship to someone or something whereby one sets one’s heart to, is loyal to, is obliged to or holds dear, cherishes, or loves (Cantwell Smith 1977).⁵ Whether someone believes, then, is a question of whether that someone is to be trusted as “one of us” or to be discredited.

Ta-Nehisi Coates’ examination of the American religion of anti-black racism/white supremacy also illuminates the necessary materiality of belief. Coates is specifically drawn to the imbrication of belief and embodiment. In his telling, belief in the “preeminence of hue and hair” to tell indelible and deeper attributes, such as the putative criminality of black Americans, is not a matter of considering a discrete intellectual claim of which one might alternately be skeptical or convinced (7). Belief is not a cognitive state, but enmeshed with practices and emotions. For Coates, to believe that one is white entails a performance; it requires a daily taking up of the various accoutrements, the extended web of privileges and prerogatives, of white supremacy. It is this performance that contributes to what he describes as Black Americans’ adamant fear of loss (14).

Coates’ rendering of the materialization of belief is evocative of Pierre Bourdieu’s claim that belief is “incorporated history.” Bourdieu insists that it is impossible to objectify or take a step back from belief. He writes, “Practical belief is not a ‘state of mind,’ still less a kind of arbitrary adherence to a set of instituted dogmas and doctrines (‘beliefs’), but rather a state of the body” (68). He goes on to insist that what is learned by the body is not something one *has*, “like knowledge that can be brandished,” but something that one *is* (73). Bourdieu’s position is evocative, in turn, of that of the philosopher of religion, H. H. Price. In his Gifford Lectures

⁵Aspects of Cantwell Smith’s argument are echoed, in turn, by Dorothea Weltecke in her (2008) study of belief in the central and late middle ages; she points out that “infidels” are not those who fail to hold certain convictions, but who are disloyal; this includes non-Christians (loyal to neither to God nor King), heretics and blasphemers (disloyal to baptismal vows) and schismatics (disloyal to Pope and the Church of Rome); see esp. 109–110.

published in 1969, Price describes belief as a disposition “like being interested in cricket or having a distaste for gardening” (20). Price later specifies that belief is a “multiform disposition” manifest in actions, emotional states, and inferences (294).

In the US context, beliefs about race not only construct “white” bodies, they grab hold of and take aim at “black” bodies. Coates admonishes his readers that the rites of white supremacy are not simply benign gatherings of whites at “wine-tastings and ice cream socials,” but the “pillaging of life, liberty, labor and land” and the “flaying of backs” and “chaining of limbs” of black bodies. These are the actions that constitute American history (8). As Coates makes clear, belief does not just sediment as certain emotions, bodies and communities, it authorizes, and perhaps requires, violence in instances of doubt and dissent. If there should be any doubts about the supremacy of whiteness, the destruction of black bodies serves as its inverse exhibition. On this point, Coates’ argument brings to mind that of Elaine Scarry, who insists that beliefs continually rely on the human body to confirm their realness. Made-up non-material items like gods, nations, races and spirits depend on human bodies to testify to their realness and durability. This testifying role of the human body can take on benign forms such as performances of possession and healing or ominous forms such as wounding and violence. Thus, the deity takes shape as scripture or communion wafer; the Holy Spirit moves on persons, compelling them to shout or claim victory over the demons of disease and despair; the deity punishes the faithless who forget their covenant promise. Scarry argues that instances of violence done to bodies are prevalent precisely when the reality of the belief or fiction is in question (Scarry 1987: 21, 115, 180, 214ff).

Throughout American history, the religion of white supremacy has been variously contested or repudiated; these episodes include numerous rebellions on the part of slaves, various political revolutions and the recognition of human rights, the abolition of slavery elsewhere, and, eventually, the legal and political equality of all US adult citizens. White supremacy is certainly not the official belief or creed of the US. The scholarly tradition affirming an “American civil religion” cites “scriptures” such as the Declaration of Independence and the Thirteenth through Fifteenth constitutional amendments in order to insist on a pervasive faith in the liberty, equality and unity of American citizens.⁶ Nonetheless, alongside these official creedal statements, the supremacy of whiteness has continuously been “validated” by the long afterlife of the Confederate flag, gerrymandering and voter restriction laws, and, more violently, by lynching, eviction, imprisonment and police brutality.

The Fields and Coates offer a materialist reading of belief that resonates with and substantiates a number of theorists from a wide variety of disciplines. Their insistence on the imbrication of belief and action is reminiscent of philosopher of religion Stuart Hampshire’s quip that beliefs that never guided action would not count as beliefs (Needham 1972, 58). Nonetheless, they do not envision belief to be a kernel of inner conviction unilaterally setting in motion human action; they would insist that actions, too, confirm, inform and direct beliefs. Their arguments suggest that it is a conceit that we possess and arrange our beliefs as so many carefully

⁶See Bellah (2005, 42), Gardella (2013), and Gorski (2017, 14).

chosen artifacts in a curated consciousness. More importantly, their focus on racism showcases the ideological work done by the presumption that religions are reducible to belief, *qua* a mental state of assent. Racism, as they rightly contend, is not merely a matter of an internal attitude and it will not be defeated if regarded as such. Moreover, in pairing “religion” and “racism,” they simultaneously challenge the presumption that “religion” and “race” refer to two entirely distinct categories, associated with the binaries of belief and blood, inward and outward, mind and body and spiritual and material, respectively. The Fields cite Durkheim to justify the isomorphism of religious and racial formations: “Durkheim located religion in human groups—in the social and intellectual processes that designate groups, their boundaries, their members, and the place of all the foregoing in the larger cosmos. Conceived that way, religion met race.” (260). Religions, nations and races are made real by the continued emotional and material investments made in them. This is the ongoing work of believing that matters. Belief sediments over the long-term as *identities* and establishes a reservoir of trust and security over and against non-believers. In turn, believers make recourse to violence in order to punish dissent and to confirm the reality of contested belief. The fact that the contemporary US presents a range of dissentient positions and divergent, even contradictory, practices should not be surprising. There is no necessary justification in making belief an “all or nothing” sort of commitment. Belief, doubt or dissent do not cancel each other out; they reflect the range of adherence as well as the sorts of exertions entailed in believing. Beliefs generate desires and affiliations as well as new sets of problems calling for investigation (Justice 2008: 18ff).

7.3 Dematerializing Belief

If the case for the materiality of belief is a plausible one, how is it that belief has come to be regarded as a mental state of assent and to be used synonymously with religion? What interests might be served by constructing religion as nonmaterial belief? Donald A. Lopez argues that the presumption that religion is conditional on belief—and, accordingly, that practices are intelligible only to the extent one can detect the beliefs “behind” the actions—is an ideology (1998, 28–31).⁷ According to Lopez, belief serves as cover for material interests.⁸ He makes his point by referring to an episode from the thirteenth century Inquisition. He describes the persecution of the Cathar heresy as follows: “the contents of men’s and women’s

⁷Lopez does not acknowledge that “ideology” can be defined as a “credo” or “set of beliefs” and thus does not clarify what he understands by “ideology” and “belief,” respectively.

⁸Lopez’ aim is, then, the opposite to that of Terry Godlove. Both recognize that religious belief is a form of commerce amidst others forms of commerce. Although Godlove appreciates that we must be critical as to which of these exchanges gets tagged as “religious,” he is convinced that it is imperative to determine which forms of commerce are authentically religious and that only adherents’ can “authorize” which of these circuits of exchange qualifies as “religious.” Lopez advocates an abiding skepticism as to the labelling of certain economies of exchange as “religious belief.”

minds serving as the pretext for the taking of property and the taking of lives” (26). He further characterizes belief as “invisible,” though pressed into service as a “surrogate” for “visible” items (27). This formulation suggests that beliefs are not actually *believed* in, but are strategically subpoenaed to further dominant material interests. The truly insidious problem, for Lopez, is that scholars have been seduced by the scam that correct belief is the real issue here.

But Lopez takes for granted that belief is a mental state. Taking into consideration Cantwell Smith’s comments above, the persecution of Cathar dissenters may reflect an understanding of belief as signaling loyalty, obedience and a shared cultural and political identity. Thus, should persons break faith with a collective, their punishments would entail material consequences. Moreover, his insistence on separating belief and materiality opens a lacunae in his analysis. In order to further illustrate what he means by the “ideology of belief,” Lopez also analyzes nineteenth century efforts to catalogue and compare the world’s religions by producing a series of catechisms. Lopez attributes these efforts to an emerging Christian consensus that religions are fundamentally a compilation of beliefs. Lopez does not suggest possible material interests that may be driving this consensus and these attendant efforts; indeed, he admits that these efforts “appear less material” (29). In the end, he remarks that moderns “believe in belief.” Thus, Lopez first dismisses belief as a ruse only to subsequently rely on its motivating power.

According to Bruno Latour, it is the premium placed on (scientific) objectivity that prompts the internalization of belief. He reasons: “Since the Moderns naturally have to come up with an explanation for the strangeness of a form of worship that cannot be justified objectively, they attribute to the savages a mental state that has internal rather than external references. As the wave of colonization advances, the world fills up with believers. A Modern is someone who believes that others believe” (Latour 2010, 2).⁹ Moreover, to be modern is to claim to know the difference between knowledge and mere belief. Knowledge is said to require the impressions wrought by material objects or the credentials of a recognized authority. The simultaneous superficiality (from the point of view of scientists) and dignity (from the point of view of Christians) of belief consists in its not depending on such evidence.

In addition to making religion compatible with the scientific method, the early modern construction of religion as synonymous with belief in a set of propositions comports with arguments in support of religious toleration. Disassociating religion from materiality and specifically from the body, loosens the rationale for punishing bodies and expropriating properties in instances of religious dissent. Religion reconstructed as belief which is susceptible only to persuasive force is positioned at a remove from vulnerable bodies. Those same bodies, in turn, become available for incorporation in and loyalty to nation states which are to take precedence over the now attenuated ties of religious belief.¹⁰ This refashioning of religion as

⁹Note that Latour does not presume that belief is internal or ideational. As he contends, “Belief is not a state of mind but a result of relationships among peoples” (Latour 2010, 2).

¹⁰Of course, not all political entities will be populated by or converted to believers in religion *qua* belief. These (heretical) entities are routinely castigated as pre-modern, uncivilized and violent.

intellectualized belief serves politically progressive ends insofar as it affords freedom of conscience as well as a peaceable religious pluralism.¹¹

But the thinning out of religious belief is not entirely salutary. The modern construction of religion as disembodied belief also frees up bodies for capitalist discipline and colonialist expansion. Less and less time, as well as resources, are devoted to religious institutions, rituals and purposes. Instead, labor and capital are increasingly expropriated for profit-making enterprises, expanding state budgets, and centralized banking and lending. This shift of investments, i.e. of the locations and uses of time/labor/capital constitute a material secularization. This movement of wealth entails a shift in the loci and substantiations of belief, not simply the diminishment of “religious belief.” Nonetheless, the reconstruction of religion as belief *qua* mental state of assent (and the concomitant cataloging and comparing of the world’s religions as so many collections of beliefs) obscures these far-reaching material transformations as to which institutions are to be the primary receivers and extenders of credit.

As I mentioned at the outset, the association of religion with internal faith or belief has been attributed to a Protestant hegemony. Of course, to believe in Jesus without relying on the testimony of the senses had long been touted as a Christian virtue, yet it was obviously a teaching wholly contradictory to church expansion, ornamentation and art, veneration of relics, sacramental theology and practice, and the proliferation of reports of miracles. The Protestant endorsement of belief, *qua* cognitive assent, and repudiation of the continuation of signs and miracles undoubtedly reflects a condemnation of Catholic excess and an unwavering devotion to scripture reading and memorization.¹² It may also reflect a Protestant accommodation to the rationalization of labor; after all, this so-called Protestant hegemony cannot be considered in isolation from the broader historical movements I have just outlined. Moreover, Protestants’ valorization of nonmaterial faith must always be qualified by the manifold material dimensions of their lived religiosity. Nonetheless, the reconstruction of Christianity as *the* religion of non-material belief or faith results in its being proclaimed as the preeminent “universal” religion, purportedly welcoming all persons and transcending the parochial boundaries of “race” or “nation.”

Yet this construal of Christianity obscures its (continuing) history of conflating belief and identity or “religion” and “race.” As Denise Buell points out, a number of early Christian leaders utilized the term *genos* to designate the movement inspired by followers of Jesus. The term *genos* summons a range of associations such as race, ethnicity, people, lineage, kind, class—conveying relative degrees of fixity and fluidity of identity (Buell 2005). This association between Christianity and race continues in the modern period; scholars trace the modern English term “race” to a sixteenth century equivalent to the Castilian *raza* which was linked to a defect or

Conflicts will continue to flare between believers and unbelievers in the construction of religion as mere belief.

¹¹ For an elaboration of these arguments, see Pritchard (2014).

¹² These public proclamations obscured the numerous reports of and inquiries into miracles; see Jane Shaw (2006).

blemish in the weave of cloth as well as to the notion of purity of blood from the fifteenth century (*limpieza de sangre*)—a designation that indicated the absence of a Catholic's relation to Jews, Moors, heretics or *penitenciados* (those who had been condemned by the Inquisition; see Medovoi 2012, 55; Sollors 2002, 102; Fredrickson 2003, 31–34). In this context, indications of infidelity are taken as signs of degenerate ancestry. This is not, then, a matter of correcting a false or heretical belief; rather, conversion, in some instances, is only apparent or not possible. Similarly, in the seventeenth-century American colonial context, Rebecca Anne Goetz documents the emergence and influence of the idea that Africans and Indians were incapable of being converted to Christianity on account of their “hereditary heathenism.” This idea increasingly challenged claims as to the universality of Christianity and thus the directive to convert *all* nations (Goetz 2012, 13ff.). This idea of “hereditary heathenism” was linked to Europeans’ attribution of varieties of skin color to the existence of humans before Adam and Eve or to a biblical curse in Genesis (Malcolmson 2013; Kendi 2016, 32).¹³ This latter consists of a loose interpretation of Noah’s cursing of his son Ham, who is reported in the text to have seen his drunken father naked.¹⁴ The interpretation is such that the curse results in Ham’s offspring Canaan (ancestor of the Cushites and Egyptians) having darker skin and a corresponding condition of disinheritance and slavery.¹⁵

This Christian conflation of “religion” and “race” continued in modern America. In nineteenth-century Protestant America, Jews, Catholics and Mormons were regarded as constituting a distinct ethnicity or “new race” and were associated with “Mahometans, Native Americans, Turks, blacks and Chinese” (Givens 1997, 17, 18, 135–37, 48). Religious racialization as grounds for condemning and excluding persons from US citizenship was summoned in various twentieth century immigration debates and court rulings.¹⁶ It perhaps goes without saying that this same religious racialization accounts for the rise of anti-Muslim rhetoric and policies in the post 9/11 US, reflecting what Medovoi argues is the historical interweaving of “dogma-line racism” and “color-line racism” (Medovoi 2012, 45, 45, 52).

¹³ As Malcolmson and Kendi (21, 32) document, differences in skin color and appearance were also attributed to differences in climate.

¹⁴ It bears repeating that the biblical curse on Canaan is not explicitly connected with skin color in the text, nor is it placed specifically on Ham. In addition, nowhere in the text does God endorse this curse (indeed, elsewhere God makes a covenant with the nation of Egypt through a woman slave, Hagar; see Williams 1993). Nonetheless, this racialized reading of the curse of Ham has been surprisingly influential. Given the prominence of Christianity among freed slaves and the felt imperative to trace the history of Africans within what was widely considered the history of humanity, i. e. the Bible, African American Christian leaders insisted on their descent from Ham (Johnson 2004).

¹⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr. denounced the racialization of the curse of Ham as a “blasphemy” that contradicted the fundamental tenants of Christianity (King 1956). The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints publicly distanced itself from Joseph Smith’s racialization of the curse of Ham when it finally recognized the priesthood of African and African-American men in 1978.

¹⁶ At least one early twentieth century US citizenship case entailed conflict over the “race of Hindus.” The debate was whether persons from India were Aryan and thus white or, as Hindus, espoused a “barbaric caste system” utterly at odds with “white civilization.” See Joshi 2006, 214–15.

Throughout Christian history, whether Catholic or Protestant, belief is not simply the invisible contents of one's mind, but is bound up with who persons are, to whom they are related and to whom they owe their loyalty. Belief is somatic. This is reflected by the understanding of heresy and idolatry as indicative of a flawed hereditary condition as well as by the rendering of Christian conversion as tantamount to a "new birth."¹⁷ Contemporary persons find it extraordinary that persons would be persecuted for their beliefs, but their wonderment is generated by a presumption that beliefs are merely mental states.

Nonetheless, the adulation of Christianity as the quintessential universal religion of "belief" and the concomitant disaggregation of religion and race hold sway over the imaginations of scholars. For instance, George Fredrickson acknowledges that modern racism bears an affinity to early modern Christian idioms, i.e. the constellation of terms and policies regarding heresy, impurity of blood, heathenism and biblical curse.¹⁸ Nonetheless, he insists that the two are categorically distinct. Broadly speaking, the religiously intolerant are said to condemn others for *what they believe* (which is apparently mutable); the racist condemns others for *what/who they are* (which is apparently immutable). Whereas the first group can be redeemed by being converted; the second group is regarded as beyond redemption. But this categorical distinction owes more to the dualism of mind and body than to Christian historical practice. In addition, Fredrickson insists that the "main thrust of Christianity" is universal salvation (46). It is rather extraordinary that Fredrickson is confident that this is the main thrust of Christianity given histories of persecution, scenes of hell and heaven, theologies of election and damnation and the lingering conflation of race and religion. Certainly there are Christian sources and practices that are supportive of the idea of universal salvation, but it is a stretch to insist they are definitive of Christianity.

It strikes me as more convincing to see anti-black racism (as justification for enslaving Africans and their descendants) as a continuation of state persecution for religious infidelity. I see them as variants of the same policy: finding cause to disenfranchise, if not destroy, various persons in a context of (presumed) scarce resources. They differ only in the manner in which to signify the corruption and danger. If religious intolerance perhaps required some theological knowledge and adjudication, the second was in accord with the basic protocol of science: observation. Ivan Hannaford describes the difference thus: "the setting aside of the metaphysical and theological scheme of things for a more logical description and classification that ordered humankind in terms of physiological and mental criteria based on observable 'facts' and tested evidence" (Hannaford 1996, 187). Difference and dissent, particularly for Christians, lent sanction to the idea that certain persons or bodies were to be regarded as morally corrupt and a source of contagion. As this taxonomy

¹⁷ All kinds of persons may have been welcomed to the saving baptismal waters, but in some instances, the baptized would have to be "washed white;" see Kendi 76.

¹⁸ Fredrickson writes, "Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain is critical to the history of Western racism because its attitudes and practices served as a kind of segue between the religious intolerance of the Middle Ages and the naturalistic racism of the modern era. The idiom remained religious, and what was inherited through the "blood" was a propensity to heresy or unbelief rather than intellectual or emotional inferiority;" see Fredrickson (2003, 40).

is discredited by shifting political and economic interests, “race” becomes ascendant in the constellation of terms distinguishing human groupings and justifying segregation, denigration, exploitation and persecution. One set of beliefs is disembedded from bodies only to have another set of beliefs take hold of bodies. Another way of describing this is that the long-standing imbrication of beliefs and bodies migrates to more consequential investments for authorizing the expropriation of labor. Race, unlike religion, receives the backing of science for generating and reading reliable distinctions among humans (despite some scientists’ explicit disavowal of the validity of race). It also receives the backing of the state; in the U.S., a number of bureaucratic forms, including the census, defines and divides the population by race and not religion (Goldberg 2002, 242). Both science and the state lend credibility (even an apparent facticity) to the fiction that is race. Thus, one might suggest that whereas secularization *appears* to entail the diminishment, privatization and depoliticization of religion—i.e. the sequestration of religion qua “belief”—it is simultaneously its covert operation in the endemic practices of racecraft.

7.4 Racism and the Ethics of Belief

What would it mean to no longer believe in white supremacy? To disavow this “demon religion?” Is the call to disinvest in race an appeal for a more comprehensive or perhaps genuine secularity? Coates relates to his son the story of his own enlightenment. He writes, “My great error was not that I had accepted someone else’s dream but that I had accepted the fact of dreams, the need for escape, and the invention of racecraft” (56). To confront the brutality of the regime of white supremacy, Coates insists, is to be “free from ghosts and myths.” Coates addresses his son: “I would not have you descend into your own dream. I would have you be a conscious citizen of this terrible and beautiful world” (108). Should we understand these comments as a challenge to rid ourselves of all ghosts and myths, all means of escape, including dreams? Is this a call for an authentic secularity governed by rationality? In other words, might we interpret Coates’ call as a variant of the demand made by proponents of an “ethics of belief?”

As I mentioned at the outset, proponents of an “ethics of belief” insist on “responsible belief formation,” the criterion of which is the thorough solicitation and careful consideration of evidence. In other words, the ethics of belief places a premium on rationality. Will more rationality finally free us of white supremacy? After all, the purported evidence of races and racism has been discredited by a number of scientists and scholars. If, however, we take seriously the preceding case for a materialist theory of belief, then periodic “cognitive hygiene” is insufficient. Recall Bourdieu’s contention that as belief is embodied, it is a conceit to imagine that we can simply step back from our beliefs and reflect on and rearrange or change them as so many merely cognitive items. This fantasy may clear our consciences, but it will not change the world.

Moreover, the Fields argue that racecraft and witchcraft are rational even if they are not true. Neither witchcraft nor racecraft, they insist, can be written off as the product

of ignorance or demagoguery. They agree with Durkheim that reason's characteristic traces are its conceptual additions to the real; its invention of abstractions and collectivities. Thus, they insist that a more faithful dedication to rationality will not eliminate racism. Indeed, white Americans do not, as a rule, affirm an explicit belief, *qua* mental state, in white supremacy. Anti-black racism is disavowed, denounced and projected onto others. Christians condemn racism as a sin which can be exorcised.¹⁹ White Christians may be encouraged to ruminate on their guilt, to denounce the falsehood of racism, and to profess their enlightenment. No one *really believes* in white supremacy and so it is said not to exist. This is how racism's extensive political and material coordinates persist. Related to this point, the Fields pose a trenchant question: "What sort of intellectual strategy is it that permits us both to dismiss race beliefs as illusions [or to insist that race is merely a social construction] and at the same time to insulate spirit beliefs from the same dismissal?" (196). I argue that the dismissal serves, paradoxically, to maintain and bolster the hierarchy that is white supremacy. It suggests the performative piety of negative theology which prohibits uttering the name of or even describing the divine—a strategy whereby denial and absence only confirm a more powerful reality. In the religion of white supremacy, denunciations of racism are analogous to denunciations of idolatry. In both cases, the denunciations implicitly convey a magnitude of power that seemingly cannot be captured in trivial attributes of appearance. Race is said to be a mere social construction, a made-up thing; but as with the idol, this recognition does not mean its power is dispelled. In contrast, many Americans are likely to profess spirit beliefs, but as these do not coalesce in a powerful social, economic and political order, they do not warrant scrutiny or subterfuge. Here I find insightful a comment by Walter Benn Michaels: "When people stopped believing in the biological reality of unicorns, they didn't start believing in unicorns as a social construction because nobody's economic order was propped up by the unicorn." (Benn Michaels 2013, 25). The relationship between belief and persistent inequality will only be evident when we finally relinquish the idea that religious beliefs are merely mental states or that they necessarily warrant respect and accommodation. As Bruno Latour, argues, "It is no longer a matter of passing from slavery to freedom by shattering idols—including that of "belief"—but of distinguishing those attachments that save from those that kill" (Latour, 61). In other words, if we wish to formulate an ethics of belief that is adequate to the persistence of racism, we must go beyond the imperative of rationality and insist on justice. The philosopher of religion Nicholas Wolterstorff once declared that "if the activities of the scholar are to be justified, that justification must be found ultimately in the contribution of

¹⁹ Evangelical Christians, under the banner of a revamped "Racial Reconciliation," have sought to convert racists so that they would come to recognize and finally disown their false, hurtful and destructive beliefs. Such beliefs would be replaced by the belief in the dignity and equality of all humans. Evangelical conversion efforts have focused on transforming one heart at a time through confession and forgiveness services, healing rallies, and the cultivation of friendships across race. Many proponents regard these efforts as a conversion to Christian teaching properly understood. In other words, racism is understood as sin (Emerson and Smith 2001, 127ff.). Nonetheless, such efforts have been criticized for ignoring the structural elements of racism, for individualizing the problem, and for lacking the necessary sacrifices (of white privileges) that need to be made to eradicate racism (Thandeka 2000; Emerson and Smith, 52ff.).

scholarship to the cause of justice-in-shalom.” (Dole and Chignell 2005: xii). Accordingly, we will be critical of beliefs not because they are irrational or made up or incoherent, but because they authorize injustice and violence. Thus, it is not acceptable to valorize belief as the authentic core of religion, to reject belief as a mere Protestant fetish, to dismiss belief as harmless, or to accommodate all belief so as to avoid charges of ethnocentrism. To the extent we recognize that religious beliefs are not sequestered from the world, entailing commerce only with non-empirical entities, we will carefully track how beliefs materialize as bodies and economies.

To retain the conventional notion of belief is to afford ourselves the consolation of good consciences in the midst of ongoing injustice and violence. We get to change our beliefs, confess our former ignorance or proclaim to see the light and aspire to live differently. We get to live as if we are not enmeshed in a racist society. A reckoning with the materialism of belief makes us uncomfortable. Alternately, some readers might object that arguments in support of belief’s materiality appear to make belief inconsequential or redundant. This suspicion is lent added weight if belief’s materialization is said not to require previous and intentional declarations of faith. Or if one’s express beliefs are shown to be discordant with who one is, what one does, and the associations and institutions in which one is embedded. Although I am tempted to agree with this conclusion, I think that retaining the category of “belief” challenges us to take responsibility for the worlds we create. To talk about race as a belief and racism as a religion is to say something quite different than that race is “socially constructed”—a refrain repeated so frequently and without comment that it seems to function as an exorcising incantation. We call something a social construction when we wish to highlight its made-up-ness and to install distance between the construction and ourselves. But that does not break their spell. We tacitly disavow a social construction, but implicitly continue to prop it up. To insist that white Americans believe in race, rather than declare that it is a “social construction” is to insist on our complicity in racism and thus to preempt the temptation to extricate ourselves from what we would like to believe are someone else’s material interests or preexisting structures.

I have insisted that a revamped philosophy of religion would do well to revisit its core concept of belief. I suggest that it also visit another category that has been central to the discipline. This category is theodicy. The Fields claim that racecraft, like witchcraft, is a theodicy. Witchcraft and racecraft represent attempts to explain why negative events happen and why some humans fail to thrive—even as they justify and perpetuate these very cycles of violence and suffering. Theodicies eviscerate human agency and responsibility for endemic suffering and brutality. Several philosophers of religion, Nick Trakakis among them, articulate a damning critique of the detachment and distance that drives the rationalization of suffering and evil in the theodicies of their fellow philosophers of religion (see Trakakis 2008, 3ff.). If philosophers of religion are to heed Wolterstorff’s plea to be faithful to the demands of justice, they will train their attention beyond the discourses produced by their guild so as to decipher and dismantle the theodicies that continue to haunt our political and cultural terrains.

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Chapter 8

Critical Theory, Conspiracy, and “Gullible Critique”



Andrew Dole

Of course conspiracy theories are an absurd deformation of our own arguments, but, like weapons smuggled through a fuzzy border to the wrong party, these are our weapons nonetheless.

(Latour 2004, p. 230)

Abstract There are important similarities between conspiracy theories and academic discourses referred to variously as ‘critique’, ‘critical theory’, ‘genealogy’, and ‘the hermeneutics of suspicion’. Like conspiracy theories, critical academic discourses have their passionate advocates. But these discourses also carry an air of disrepute in broader academic circles. In a trenchant 2004 essay Bruno Latour expressed a set of worries about the intellectual respectability of “critique” centered on the resemblance between critique and conspiracy theories. I develop this line of thinking by calling attention to formal features that examples of “critique” can share with conspiracy theories, positioning both types of discourse within the broader category of “suspicious explanation”. I conclude by offering an account of what might be meant by Latour’s reference to “gullible critique”.

Keywords Critical theory · Conspiracy · Bruno Latour · Genealogy · Hermeneutics

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8.1 Introduction

I will be arguing that there are important similarities between conspiracy theories and a certain range of academic discourses, to examples of which the terms ‘critique’, ‘critical theory’, ‘genealogy’, and ‘the hermeneutics of suspicion’ are sometimes applied. My aim in making this argument is not to bring these “critical” discourses into disrepute, but rather to offer a partial explanation for the disrepute that already attaches to them. Like conspiracy theories, critical academic discourses have their passionate advocates, who tend to regard those who consider and reject the claims those discourses offer as part of the problem rather than part of the solution. But it also seems to me that within the academy there exists an analog of the fact that the term “conspiracy theorist” carries connotations of cognitive deficiency. To be a “genealogist” or a “critical theorist” is to be a particular kind of scholar, and to be described as such is not always a good thing. I will be arguing that there are formal similarities between critical discourses and conspiracy theories that contribute to these similarities of reputation.

I locate this discussion within the philosophy of religion because I agree with Tal Lewis (and others) that philosophy has important contributions to make to the academic study of religion, and in relation to the critical discourses I see an opportunity for one such. Lewis notes that within religious studies the project of “genealogy” has expanded considerably over the past several decades, to the point where it is now uncontroversial to identify Foucault as the modern paragon and to tick off a list of ‘usual suspects’ when one wants to identify the genre (he mentions Asad, Chidester, Fitzgerald, and Masuzawa; this list could be expanded) (Lewis 2015, 149).¹ The growth of this genre presents an opportunity for philosophical engagement—or, more precisely, re-engagement. A longstanding project in Anglophone philosophy has been the identification and evaluation of patterns of reasoning that are employed in various fields of inquiry outside philosophy—or perhaps more generally, of the various ways in which information is taken to motivate conclusions in other fields. And if the most prominent examples of this project are found in the subfield of the philosophy of science, there is also a longstanding, if lesser known, history of critical discussions of the logic of the social sciences. Within this history I am particularly interested in engagements by philosophers with Ricoeur’s “masters of suspicion”, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. The works of these authors have commanded the attention of rational reconstructors from Popper onwards; and to my mind the final decades of the last century were a particularly fruitful period for such work.² It seems to me that our critical theorists and genealogists are mining the

¹I am inclined to see important similarities between Lewis’ genealogists and the work of such scholars as Richard King, Bruce Lincoln, Russel McCutcheon, and Craig Martin; my reasons for this should become clear as this essay progresses.

²I am, perhaps, most greatly indebted to the ‘analytic Marxists’ for my understanding of the patterns of reasoning involved in the tradition of suspicion. The ur-text of analytic Marxism is Cohen (2000), first published in 1978. At least as important for my purposes is Miller (1987), which I am inclined to see as a development out of the analytic Marxist tradition (see, for example, Miller

same seams, more or less, as were the “masters of suspicion”, such that the gains of reconstructing the arguments of these ‘masters’ can be extended to this more recent literature.³

It also seems to me that a comparison between these critical discourses and conspiracy theories is a good starting-point for this project. I appropriate the idea of such a comparison from Bruno Latour, who in the early years of this century, claiming that “critical theory died away long ago”, argued for a revival of critique via a shift of focus from “matters of fact” to “matters of concern” (Latour 2004). One set of grounds Latour presented for thinking that critique had “run out of steam” was his sense that critical theorists were still fighting the battles of the 1960s a lifetime later. But more important, on my view, are his observations about the similarities between the posture or attitude of the “critical theorist” and those of the conspiracy theorist.

What has become of critique when my neighbor in the little Bourbonnais village where I live looks down on me as someone hopelessly naïve because I believe that the United States had been attacked by terrorists? Remember the good old days when university professors could look down on unsophisticated folks because those hillbillies naïvely believed in church, motherhood, and apple pie? Things have changed a lot, at least in my village. I am now the one who naïvely believes in some facts because I am educated, while the other guys are too unsophisticated to be gullible: “Where have you been? Don’t you know that the Mossad and the CIA did it?” (Latour 2004, 228)

In this passage what Latour noted as a particular worry was the fact that both conspiracy theorists and critique depend on accusations of *naïveté* to explain why others do not accept their critical claims. And it is clear that in this passage Latour saw this commonality as indicative of the possibility that critical theory might share some of the intellectual deficiencies of conspiracy theories. He pursued the comparison further in reflections on the state of contemporary theory in France:

Let me be mean for a second. What’s the real difference between conspiracists and a popularized, that is a teachable version of social critique inspired by a too quick reading of, let’s say, a sociologist as eminent as Pierre Bourdieu...? In both cases, you have to learn to become suspicious of everything people say because of course we all know that they live in the thralls of a complete *illusio* of their real motives. Then, after disbelief has struck and an explanation is requested for what is really going on, in both cases again it is the same appeal to powerful agents hidden in the dark acting always consistently, continuously, relentlessly. Of course, we in the academy like to use more elevated causes—society, discourse, knowledge-slash-power, fields of forces, empires, capitalism—while conspiracists like to portray a miserable bunch of greedy people with dark intents, but I find something troublingly similar in the structure of the explanation, in the first movement of disbelief and, then, in the wheeling of causal explanations coming out of the deep dark below. What if explanations resorting automatically to power, society, discourse had outlived their

1984). See also Wood (2004). On Freud see Sherwood (1969) and Grünbaum (1984); on Nietzsche, see David Allison (2001) and Owen (2007). A particularly useful essay that keeps these three ‘masters’ in view is Leiter (2004).

³An important recent book in a similar vein is Koopman (2013). My approach differs from Koopman’s in that he is primarily interested in Foucaultian ‘genealogy’ as a method of inquiry, informed by the work of Ian Hacking and Paul Rabinow.

usefulness and deteriorated to the point of now feeding the most gullible sort of critique?
(Latour 2004, 229f)

Latour's purpose in this essay was not so much to analyze critical theory as it was to propose a pathway to its renewal. He did not answer his own "what's the real difference" question; neither did he say with any particular clarity why it would be a bad thing for critical theory to strongly resemble conspiratorial theorizing. But his "what if" question at least hints at a criticism of critical theory: that (in certain degenerate forms) acceptance of its productions requires an attitude of gullibility.

I propose to pursue the project, suggested by Latour's remarks, of identifying structural similarities between conspiracy theories and critical academic discourses. And I propose to address directly the question of why such similarities might motivate skepticism concerning the intellectual legitimacy of such discourses, eventually by saying what might be meant by Latour's term "gullible critique".

8.2 The Critical Ethos

It would be foolish of me, I think, to attempt any kind of strict definition of a "critical academic discourse", one that would position such things as critical theory, critique, the hermeneutics of suspicion, and genealogy as sub-types. But I do need at least an initial description of the field I intend to discuss. So I will begin with a description of what I take to be the general ethos of the critical discourses.

Uncontroversially, while some scholars may pursue knowledge for its own sake, others are devoted to the project of generating knowledge that will make for a better world. And it seems to me that among these there is something like consensus with regard to a certain understanding of the current state of affairs in human sociality. According to that understanding, the human social world is characterized by massive amounts of inequity, injustice, and unnecessary suffering, which is all the worse for being unfairly distributed across different (geographical, ethnic, gendered) populations; the diachronic and synchronic causes of these conditions—that is, the factors that have brought them into being and the factors that preserve them—are not well understood; and this lack of understanding is itself a cause of the persistence of the bad conditions in question. There is, then, an ethical imperative behind the pursuit of knowledge of how societies work. As Michel Foucault put the point in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, "since these things have been made, they can be unmade, as long as we know how it was that they were made" (Koopman and Matza 2013, 834).⁴

⁴Koopman and Matza preface this quotation with a description that, to my reading, assigns explanatory significance to Foucaultian 'archaeology and genealogy': "The central motif of Foucault's critical empiricism is not so much the simple fact of contingency as it is an inquiry into processes of contingent composition. Through what combinations of practices, subjectivities, relations of force, and rationalities has a particular practice been contingently assembled? If the traditional view is that genealogies and archaeologies help us recognize that our conceptual assemblages are

I take the project I have described to comport well with a description of critical theory offered by Seyla Benhabib. In *Critique, Norm, and Utopia* Benhabib distinguished two aspects of critical theory. The first of these is an “*explanatory-diagnostic*” aspect through which the findings and methods of the social sciences are appropriated in such a way as to develop an empirically fruitful analysis of the crisis potential of the present... to analyze the contradictions and dysfunctionalities of the present, and to explicate the protests or pathologies—as the case may be—which they give rise to in the population.” According to Benhabib this first aspect of critical theory is properly to be oriented towards the second “*anticipatory-utopian*” aspect: “When explicating the dysfunctionalities of the present, a critical social theory should always do so in the name of a better future and a more humane society. The purpose of critical theory is not crisis management, but crisis diagnosis such as to encourage future transformation.” Moreover, for this overarching purpose critical theory needs to make a point of emphasizing the badness of the causes it identifies (i.e. the role these play in causing or preserving bad social conditions): “a critical social theory is not exclusively interested in impersonal forces that act behind the backs of social agents, but in showing how such forces generate certain experiences of suffering, humiliation, aggression, and injustice, which in turn can lead to resistance, protest, and organized struggle” (Benhabib 1986, 226).⁵

Now it seems to me that a very wide range of academic projects can aim at the production of knowledge regarding the workings of the human social world that will make possible that world’s alteration in the direction of (for lack of a better term) justice. It also seems to me that the terms ‘genealogy’, ‘critical theory’, and ‘the hermeneutics of suspicion’ refer to a recognizable subset of such projects. I do not think there is a sharp internal boundary that marks these off from justice-oriented social-scientific research projects in general. But I am inclined to think that such research projects move in the direction of this recognizable subfield inasmuch as they display and develop one specific characteristic. That characteristic has to do with the account that the research project offers of the *absence* of the sort of knowledge that it aims to produce.

One reason why knowledge of the causes of bad social conditions might be lacking is that certain difficulties that attend the project of its production—difficulties due to the complexity of human social relations, say, or due to the elusiveness of the sort of data that would make for their proper understanding—have not yet been surmounted. To my mind, academic research projects move into ‘critical’ territory

contingent, then our view is that, as analytics, these can help our inquiries uncover how different conceptual assemblages were contingently composed.” Koopman echoes this point in Koopman (2013), p. 12: “if we are to reconstruct our present so that it may yield better futures, we first need a grip on the materials out of which our present has been constructed in the past.”

⁵I owe this reference to Koopman. It is worth noting that according to Benhabib, the Frankfurt school “lost its explanatory-diagnostic dimension” subsequent to the *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*; and Koopman largely agrees with the common view that Foucault’s work, while recognizably critical in Benhabib’s ‘diagnostic’ sense, generally lacked a coherent ‘anticipatory-utopian’ dimension. See Benhabib (1986, p. 227), and Koopman (2013, pp. 241 f).

to the extent that they accept an understanding of their own necessity that differs from this. It is easiest to identify the relevant alternative by attending to its least subtle form, which is the form employed by conspiracy theories: the truth about the causes of bad social conditions has been *intentionally concealed* by agents with the power to do so, *precisely because* knowledge of those causes would make it possible for social conditions to be changed in ways that would work contrary to their advantage. And this truth has been concealed through the device of *arranging the available evidence* so that it paints a false picture of what is really going on. The general principle at work in this position is that there is some linkage between the *content* of the knowledge in question and the fact of its unavailability: whatever difficulties may attend the project of understanding human social dynamics generally, this *specific* body of knowledge is unavailable *because* it is the kind of knowledge whose possession would make change in the direction of “a more humane society” possible. As I will discuss below, there are alternatives to conspiratorial intentionality for fleshing out this general principle.

What distinguishes critical academic discourses from the broader class of goodness-oriented social-scientific research projects, then, is their posture as projects of ‘unmasking’. The problem is not that the available data has not been competently amassed and assessed: the problem is that *appearances are deceptive in this particular area of inquiry*, such that the discovery of the truth requires a willingness to discount the evidential value of sources that have been regarded as good information. One historical touchstone for the critical academic discourses is Max Horkheimer’s 1937 essay “Traditional and Critical Theory”. In this essay Horkheimer, working within the broadly Marxist tradition, described theorists of a “critical attitude” as persons as “whose business it is to hasten developments which will lead to a society without injustice” (Horkheimer 1992, 221). Such persons understand the social world in a different way than do the “uncritical”:

The identification, then, of men of critical mind with their society is marked by tension, and the tension characterizes all the concepts of the critical way of thinking. Thus, such thinkers interpret the economic categories of work, value, and productivity exactly as they are interpreted in the existing order, and they regard any other interpretation as pure idealism. But at the same time they consider it rank dishonesty simply to accept the interpretation; the critical acceptance of the categories which rule social life contains simultaneously their condemnation (Horkheimer 1992, 208).

A recent remark by Brian Leiter provides a more economical illustration of the point I have in mind here. In the course of arguing for the merits of the “hermeneutics of suspicion”, as practiced by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, as a resource for a recovery of the relevance of philosophy to the broader world, he states simply that

“Philosophy becomes relevant because the world—riven as it is with hypocrisy and concealment—desperately needs a hermeneutics of suspicion to unmask it” (Leiter 2004, 78).

With this initial description in hand, I move now to the core of my essay. In the next section I propose a general formulation that I think makes possible a useful comparison between critical academic discourses and conspiracy theories.

8.3 On Suspicious Explanations

In *Freud and Philosophy*, Paul Ricoeur did philosophy a disservice in describing Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as purveyors of interpretations (Ricoeur 1970). More profitable, in my view, than a hermeneutical framework for the reconstruction of the ‘masters of suspicion’ is an *explanatory* framework. I propose as a replacement for Ricoeur’s “hermeneutics of suspicion” the idea of a *suspicious explanation*.⁶ I take the project of offering *suspicious explanations of large-scale social phenomena* to comprise the core device of both conspiracy theories and critical academic discourses.

Qua explanations, suspicious explanations begin with something taken to be the case—an *explanandum*—and offer an account or story (an *explanans*) such that if the account or story is true, an important “why” or “how” question is answered: why that something is the case, for example, or how it came to be the case.⁷ *Suspicious* explanations have two distinctive marks. The first mark is that a suspicious explanation positions its *explanans* as in some way concealed from direct observation, as not evident on the surface, as hidden, obfuscated, mystified, or what have you. And the second mark is that the explanation in some way involves reference to negative ethical valuations (that is to say, *bad things*)—most often by attributing negatively valued characteristics (badness) to the phenomena that comprise the *explanans*. *Hiddenness* and *badness* are thus the distinctive marks of a suspicious explanation; we might say that such an explanation stereotypically claims that some observable phenomenon is the product of *sinister forces operating clandestinely*.

Certainly there are suspicious explanations of small-scale phenomena (Smith voted against Jones’s bid for tenure out of concealed envy, for example), but what matter for my purposes are suspicious explanations of large-scale social phenomena. Examples of these are religions, liberalism, the distribution of wealth in a society, male dominance, the French Revolution, and folk-rock music. Large-scale social phenomena are fascinating objects of explanation because while they are just the product of the activity of human beings, they are also too large to be the product of any single individual’s activity. Thus while an explanation of some person’s action can make use of commonly accepted psychological mechanisms and need not extend outside the psychology of the person involved, explanations of large-scale social phenomena require something more: they require either causal forces other than those that reside within individual persons or some method of amplifying

⁶The ideas presented in this section are discussed at considerably greater length in Dole (2018).

⁷Just what it is for something to be explained is, at bottom, somewhat mysterious. I follow Alan Garfinkel, Richard Miller, and others in grounding my discussion of explanation in the idea that human beings generally have an established set of practices surrounding the proposal, evaluation, acceptance and rejection of explanations. If our ability to reconstruct the principles that inform these practices has limitations, it seems fairly clear that under normal conditions our agreement regarding what counts as a good explanation is clear enough that we can argue coherently regarding the virtues of different explanations. See Garfinkel (1981) and Miller (1987).

the causal powers of individual agents to the point where they can plausibly cause large-scale effects.

This brief introduction to suspicious explanation suggests three focal points for the comparison of conspiracy theories and critical academic discourses. The first of these is the way in which these discourses handle the issue of the *scale* of the causal factors involved in the production of large-scale social phenomena. The second is how they postulate *hiddenness*. And the third is how they associate their explananda with *badness*. On my view, a principal distinction between conspiracy theories and critical academic discourses is that the former handle each of these three issues in entirely intuitive ways, whereas the latter do so through the introduction of more complex and less accessible notions.

First, consider the issue of the scale of causal factors. Conspiracy theories handle this issue in a straightforward way: they postulate co-ordinated activity on the part of many human beings, thereby invoking an agential force of the right size to bring about large-scale social phenomena.⁸ What explains the large-scale social phenomena at issue is the goal-directed activity not of an agent but of many agents working together, consolidating their individual causal powers into a greater but still goal-directed whole. The conspiracy theory makes use of perhaps the least cognitively demanding way of scaling up the explanatory power of human agency: it attributes the same kind of goal-directed activity to multiple persons. No more complex apparatus is required for this attribution than some framework that allows for a group of persons to have common aims; and for this purpose pre-existing social identities (ethnic, national, religious, or political) have traditionally sufficed.

There are alternative ways to invoke causal forces of the requisite scale. I begin with the idea of *exotic agency*. As we know well in religious studies, agency can be attributed to entities other than human beings; it can be attributed to rocks and trees, to rivers and mountains, and even to fictional beings of arbitrary degrees of greatness (pick whichever gods you do not believe in). Given that we are capable of attributing agency to such a wide range of actual and non-actual entities, it is no great trick to attribute agency to abstractions, whether these are supposed to comprise many human beings (society, the bourgeoisie, the West) or complexes of ideas and/or social structures (Christianity, capitalism, liberalism). And entities of this sort are such that if they were agents, they would be the right size and longevity to cause persistent large-scale social phenomena.

One way, then, to invoke agency in explaining a large-scale social phenomena is to postulate an exotic agent, whether natural or supernatural, with the right sort of power. Such a postulation can be combined with a conspiracy theory, for example when Pat Robertson eventually claimed that Satan was the mastermind behind the conspiracy to bring about a 'New World Order' centered in the Trilateral Commission and eventually announced to the world (for practical purposes) by George H. W. Bush

⁸For reasons of economy I will generalize fairly freely regarding the typical characteristics of conspiracy theories. Among the works I include in this genre are Robison (1798), Dwight (1798), Bey (1878), Webster (1920), Blanshard (1949), Noebel (1966), Robertson (1991), and Limbaugh (2003).

(See Robertson 1991, in particular p. 168). But exotic agency offers an alternative to conspiratorial ideation in that it provides an apparatus for claiming that the actions of individual persons have been co-ordinated towards some end without claiming that these persons have themselves undertaken this co-ordination or adopted this end. In this connection we can consider Bruce Lincoln’s claims, in an afterword to the second edition of *Emerging from the Chrysalis*, that women’s initiation rituals are “one of the central crucibles in which society takes persons possessed of two X chromosomes and works on them in order to transform their raw material into a finished product”, and that these rituals “serve to produce subjects who will thereafter accept the positions, statuses, and modes of being that society desires for and demands of them” (Lincoln 1991, 112f). Lincoln’s use of the language of agency here does not entail that women’s initiation rituals are the product of a conspiracy. For he attributed the agential powers involved to society itself: “Society as a whole is the agent in women’s initiation, acting to preserve the stability of the social collectivity” (Lincoln 1991, 94).

As I read the history of the critical academic discourses, robust appeals to exotic agency such as Lincoln’s are rare. But nevertheless the notion is an important touchstone. One way to narrate the history of critical theory is as a series of developments downstream of Hegel. Uncontroversially for the ‘left-Hegelian’ traditions, Hegel’s notion of *Geist* was a device for naturalizing (in the sense of de-supernaturalizing) such ideas as divine providence, or for appropriating for philosophical naturalism some of the benefits of appeals to God-sized agency in explaining large-scale historical events. But as is well known, the common sense on the part of Hegel’s early naturalist followers was that Hegel failed to do justice to concrete historical conditions, including the agency of human persons. From Feuerbach on, it seems to me, the left-Hegelian project has been to avoid the postulation of “a superhuman, cosmic spirit cutting a singular, teleological path across the ‘slaughter-bench of history’”, to use Lewis’s words,⁹ while at the same time preserving one specific feature of the sort of explanation that this postulation makes possible (Lewis 2015, 153). That feature is expressed in Hegel’s famous notion of the “cunning of reason”: it is the idea that we have already encountered, that the actions of large numbers of human beings have been *arranged by forces external to themselves in order to produce specific large-scale results*. This notion, fairly obviously, provides a rationale for the teleological explanation of large-scale social phenomena: it allows for the claim that such things as wars, religion, income inequality, and the like exist because their existence serves certain ends. That explanations of this sort are useful is witnessed, I think, by their prevalence within the historical record, specifically in the form of appeals to the agency of divine beings or to conspiratorial groups.

The question is whether large-scale historical processes can be governed by the logic of teleology in the absence of super- or transhuman agents and without appeals

⁹Lewis speaks for the majority of contemporary reconstructors of Hegel in preferring a reading according to which “this absolute [i.e. Spirit] is to be understood in terms of the social practices of the human community rather than the superhuman being frequently represented in religious representations”; Lewis (2015, p. 77).

to conspiratorial machinations. It seems to me that the critical academic discourses have generally attempted to steer a course between these two rocks. But it also seems to me that they have had considerable difficulty in doing so consistently, and that both Lincoln's recourse to exotic agency and Latour's worried reflections on the state of critique are symptoms of this condition. In fact I am tempted to think that this is what Foucault had in mind when he worried, as Lewis notes, that at the end of "our anti-Hegelianism" "he [Hegel] stands, motionless, waiting for us"; but that is a topic for another day (Lewis 2015, 152 n. 14).

I think it fairly uncontroversial to say that attempts during the modern period to identify a middle way between vulgar-Hegelian and conspiratorial explanations have centered around the notion of *social function*, and around the project of *social-functional* explanation.¹⁰ The general idea behind social-functional explanation is that the actions of individual agents are channelled along certain pathways that produce certain large-scale results, such that (just as in teleological explanations) the fact that those actions produce those results is crucial to the explanation of why the agents perform them; but this channelling is not a result of any agent's actions, nor are the results envisioned or intended by any agents. Rather, the actions of persons are organized by non-agential factors such as social structures or economic conditions. And that these non-agential factors organize human actions towards these specific results is not a product of the operation of any agency, but is rather to be explained by the overall organization of the factors themselves, usually by way of the claim that several of these constitute a *system* whose persistence depends on the achievement of these results, and which system has the ability to ensure that the conditions of its persistence are satisfied.¹¹ The canonical articulations of this idea are found in the anthropological literature beginning with Durkheim and continuing in Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski; but I follow G.A. Cohen in seeing Marx as a theorist who hit on this device for explaining the course of history at a level of analysis comparable to Hegel's but without the postulation of exotic agency.¹²

¹⁰ Social functionalism is a philosophically interesting topic with a fascinating history. Discussion of functional explanation weaves through the literature in the philosophy of the social sciences. In addition to Miller (1987) and Cohen (2000) (see below) on functionalism, see Merton (1957) and Turner and Maryanski (1979).

¹¹ For an accessible discussion of the logic of functional explanations that responds to some puzzles left open by Cohen, see Miller (1987, pp. 118–126).

¹² Functionalism was a methodological centerpiece of Cohen (2000), and the publication of this book produced significant subsequent discussion of the topic. Particularly relevant for my purposes (for reasons that will become clear below) is Halfpenny (1983). Halfpenny points out (correctly in my view) that conspiratorial claims provide one way of elaborating Marxian functional explanations, and claims (more controversially) that in the absence of any other viable type of elaboration (or as he puts it, "Given that the purposive elaboration ... is the only intelligible one that can be applied *generally* in the social sciences"), "historical materialism is no more than what Cohen refers to as a conspiracy theory, in which members of the ruling class or revolutionary class selectively support or institute arrangements that they believe are beneficial to their goals"; Halfpenny (1983, p. 83).

I want to note here that I have identified three different idioms for unpacking the idea that a certain large-scale social phenomenon exists because its existence has certain consequences: exotic agency, conspiracy, and social functionalism. And I want to call attention to the fact that teleological turns of phrase such as are commonly deployed in critical academic discourses can invoke this general idea without differentiating between these idioms. Take, for example, Lincoln’s claim that female initiation rituals “serve to produce subjects who will thereafter accept the positions, statuses, and modes of being that society desires for and demands of them”. By itself this statement does not imply a conspiratorial, exotic-agential, or social-functional underpinning; it is Lincoln’s explicit avowal of exotic agency that militates against conspiratorial or social-functional readings. The point here is that given that the conspiracy is one way—indeed, to my thinking the most accessible way—of unpacking claims to the effect that a large-scale social phenomenon exists because its existence serves some end, one way to fail to differentiate a social explanation from a conspiracy theory is to fail to be clear about the conceptuality that underlies the explanation. I will return to this point later.

My second point of comparison is ‘hiddenness’. To repeat what I have already said, here conspiracy theories employ a straightforward and intuitive idea. That the truth is ‘hidden’ is a result of collective intentional action; the existence and workings of the conspiracy is not evident to casual observation because the conspirators have agreed to keep its existence a secret. A corollary of this principle is that one potential source of evidence against the truth of the theory is defanged: since the conspiracy theory predicts that conspirators will act to preserve the secret of the conspiracy’s existence, the denial of the existence of the conspiracy on the part of anyone suspected of being part of it has no evidential value. In the context of a conspiracy theory, the general theme that “appearances are misleading” translates into the claim that testimony by suspected conspirators cannot be taken at face value. And what stands to be “unmasked” is a set of desires, motivations, intentions, plans, and actions on the part of human persons.

Above I mentioned that one way to account for the absence of desirable knowledge concerning the working of human society is to say that the task of producing this knowledge has simply not yet succeeded, perhaps because it has not yet been properly conducted, or perhaps because it has not been conducted at all. This minimal kind of ‘hiddenness’ is certainly on display in the critical tradition—for example, in (later) Marx’s and (early) Freud’s claims to be, basically, simply conducting good science. But also on display in this history is the limited utility of this notion for responding to a common fate to befall the productions of critical theory: lack of uptake by the relevant research communities. The claim that some truth has not yet been discovered cannot by itself explain why persons searching for this truth should have failed to discover it, nor why anyone presented with this truth should fail to accept it. Simple ignorance is a useful account of hiddenness, it seems to me, only early on in the career of a suspicious explanation. Any proposal that diverges from the majority report of a well-populated area of inquiry and which over time fails to gain wide acceptance will need a different account of hiddenness. The postulation of the deliberate concealment of the truth, such as is found in conspiracy theories, is

useful for this purpose, as it typically involves the claim that the available evidence has been so arranged that even the best-intentioned “uncritical” researchers (that is, those who are not already in on the conspiracy) will miss the truth.

But there are other possibilities. Perhaps the most obvious alternative to the conspiratorial deception of others is self-deception, the deliberate concealment of the truth from oneself. While there are appeals to self-deception in Marx and Nietzsche, I take it that it was Freud who developed a formal and powerful account of self-deception, one that explained not only why the psychological factors (desires, memories, resolutions) postulated by his theories are not introspectively available, but also why those theories might be rejected by researchers in psychology¹³ (and by a broader reading public¹⁴). This notion is close to conspiratorial hiddenness inasmuch as it appeals to the idea of deliberate deception to explain why the available evidence (memory and introspection) suggests a false picture of the self’s history and motivations. I take it that it is an open question whether Freud is best interpreted as postulating robust chains of reasoning and action unfolding within the unconscious mind or as using the language of agency as a model for processes of whose true nature we are ignorant (see, for example, Freud 2006, 51); but either way it is the language of agency that does the necessary explanatory work.

I will mention two ways of accounting for hiddenness that make no appeals to agential notions. First, one can offer something of an adaptive account. Take the notion of religious legitimation as a possible example. In *The Sacred Canopy* Peter Berger argued that religion (sometimes) contributes to the reproduction of social arrangements across generations by way of the device of legitimation—the device of portraying these as reflective of transcendent realities, such that no mere mortal is in a position to question or alter them (Berger 1969, in particular chapter 2, “Religion and World-Maintenance”). Religious legitimations only have this effect if the claims involved are regarded by the rising generation as something other than *mere* devices for ensuring social stability; thus if in fact they *are* merely such devices, their continued existence requires ignorance concerning their true nature. Without saying anything about mechanisms whereby this hiddenness might be secured, one could say that only those religious legitimations whose true nature is not understood will manage to last for long, and thus that the ‘hiddenness’ of the true nature of such social arrangements is a condition of their persistence.

In this modest form, an adaptive account of hiddenness has the same limitation as the ‘simple ignorance’ account: it does not by itself explain why anyone seeking

¹³ Freud’s statement, in a letter to Jung, that “My inclination is to treat colleagues who offer resistance exactly as we treat patients in the same situation” is the tip of an important iceberg in the tradition of suspicion. See George Makari (2008, p. 204). In Dole (2018) I coin the term *recursive ad hominem defense* as a label for the strategy that Freud developed (and that some of his followers have continued to deploy).

¹⁴ So, for example: “This discovery of the significance of incest for the neurosis naturally meets with the most general incredulity on the part of the grown-up, normal man We are forced to believe that such a rejection is above all the product of man’s deep aversion to his former incest wishes which have since succumbed to repression.” Freud (1998, p. 15).

the truth about the phenomenon in question should have failed to discover it, nor why anyone presented with the truth about it should reject it. This is because the adaptive account *simpliciter* does not go so far as to claim that “appearances are deceptive”. But this modest adaptive account can easily be expanded. If in general a functional explanation claims that some social phenomenon is as it is because its being that way is required for the continuing operation of the system of which it is a component, to claim that the available evidence in some area is deceptive *because its being deceptive is required for the same reason* is no more than an application of this general principle. Thus to the extent that a social-functionalist conceptuality attributes to social systems an ability to ensure that the conditions of their own persistence are satisfied, it attributes to such systems the ability to render appearances deceiving.

My third point of comparison is negative ethical valuation. I use the term *ethical* rather than *moral* here because suspicious explanations, conspiratorial and otherwise, are often constructed around valuations that are non-moral but are still, recognizably, such that they could be affirmed by groups of persons. John Robison’s canonical conspiracy theory, for example, accused the Illuminati of desiring not only control of the world’s governments, but also the destruction of aristocratic rule; Timothy Dwight appropriated and extended Robison’s claims to accuse the same shadowy group of backing the disestablishment of the Congregationalist clergy in New England; Nietzsche portrayed morality as inimical to the unobstructed exercise of the will to power, as well as to simple good health. In each of these cases the author wrote for an audience he presumed would attribute positive value to the phenomena in question—aristocratic rule, established religion, good health—and in each cases the valuations in play are non-moral and historically contingent. The range of the values to which suspicious explanations can appeal is at least as wide as the range of values to which the diverse human communities of the world can be committed.¹⁵ And this matters because differences in value commitments is one of the things that explains why suspicious explanations tend to be accepted more readily in certain circles than in others—a point to which I will return later.

The values that conspiracy theories invoke are usually fairly straightforward. Conspirators are normally, as Latour puts the point, “a miserable bunch of greedy people with dark intents”—people with bad values, bad ends, and/or bad modes of action. They aim at the destruction of good things and the elevation of bad things (where, recall, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ can be relative to the commitments of a particular audience); they are malicious or possibly just indifferent to the suffering of others;

¹⁵ In this connection Edward Craig remarks that “I doubt whether there can be such a thing as an intrinsically neutral genealogy, if that means one containing no feature which human beings could, even locally and temporarily, find to tell for or against the item whose history it purports to narrate” (Craig 2007, 184). Although Craig does not develop the point, here he touches on the idea that the evaluative payoff of a suspicious explanation will be a product of the valuations which particular communities accept, or can be brought to accept. So, for example, a genealogy that uncovers racist sentiments and programs within the historical career of a political party could be ‘subversive’ for an audience dedicated to racial equality and ‘vindicatory’ for a racist audience.

they are selfish or chauvinistic, desiring advantages for themselves or for their group at the expense of others or outsiders. Furthermore conspirators present a false front to the world, concealing both their true motives and the agreement among them that constitutes the conspiracy. Conspirators are typically dishonest, dissembling, devious, and this is a measure of their badness independent of whatever is the goal of their conspiratorial activity. There is probably an infinite range of variations on the theme of the badness of conspirators. But a unifying theme in conspiracy theories is that the kinds of badness that matter are those that make the conspirators a powerful threat to the values around which the theory is constructed.

I want to discuss three non-conspiratorial ways in which the explanation of a large-scale social phenomenon can motivate the negative evaluation of the causes it identifies. The first way, which I will discuss only briefly, appeals to exotic agency: to the extent that God or society is an agent, God or society can have the same sorts of characteristics (greed, indifference to suffering, etc.) that ground the ethical evaluation of persons. For the most part, language within the critical tradition that seems to attribute such characteristics to exotic agents is best understood rhetorically, as for example when Marx claimed in *Capital* that “Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks” (Marx 1990, 342). But this is not always the case. In the afterword to which I referred above Lincoln remarked, for example, “I have come to view as immoral any discourse or practice that systematically operates to benefit the already privileged members of society at the expense of others, and I reserve the same judgment for any society that tolerates or encourages such discourses and practices” (Lincoln 1991, 112); and his understanding of societies as agents makes it possible to take this moral language at face value.

Second, functionalism offers an alternative for the negative evaluation of social phenomena. Edward Craig borrows from Bernard Williams the view that “very many genealogies work by assigning functions to their objects, telling us what they are for. If the function is of some importance to us and the object performs it well, we have to that degree a recommendation, if we find the function in some way disreputable, then a critique” (Craig 2007, 184). To claim that a social phenomenon (religion in general, rituals specifically, or whatever) *has as its function* the production of some social effect is to say more than simply that it *produces* this effect. The claim weighs against the possibility that the bad effects that a thing produces might be merely accidental; for example, clouds block sunlight, but this is not their function. The language establishes an intimate connection between the effects that thing produces and its very existence: the production of the bad effect as it were follows from the existence of the phenomenon. Craig’s remarks suggest that intimacy of this link licenses the evaluation of a phenomenon as good or bad in accordance with the goodness or badness of the effects that it produces, in a way that the mere claim that the entity in fact produces these effects does not.

I want to pause here to take note of the fact that the role that notions of agency play in functional ascriptions of this sort is elusive. Craig’s language in claiming that the ascription of functions to phenomena tells us “what they are for” is teleological, and we can easily unpack the idea that such ascriptions have evaluative

significance in teleological terms. For any social condition we consider “disreputable”—say, the subjugation of women—we would, I take it, be inclined to attach a negative evaluation to any person’s *desire* to bring about that condition and to any person’s *actions* aimed at bringing it about. A phenomenon that is “for” the production of such a condition, in the sense that it is created by some such agent for the purpose of bringing it about, is thus the means by which a bad purpose is accomplished; to put it differently, it is an operational extension or an expression of a bad intention.

Now it seems to me the evaluative significance of functional claims does not entirely depend on teleological notions. As we have seen, social functionalism supposes that it is possible that a phenomenon have as its function the production of specific social effects without any agent’s having intended that it produce those effects, and without any agent’s having created or ordained it to produce them. In such cases there is, in the strict sense, nothing that the phenomenon is “for”. But something important survives this stripping-away of teleological notions. If, in the context of agency, the functional phenomenon is the means whereby a bad aim is accomplished, then interfering with the operation of the phenomenon is a way to frustrate this accomplishment. Analogously, in the non-agential case, if it is by way of the operation of the functional phenomenon that a system ensures that the conditions of its persistence are satisfied, then interfering with the operation of the phenomenon is a way to frustrate this satisfaction. Thus it seems to me that the question of whether agency is involved makes only a subtle difference with regard to the sort of negative attitude that is appropriate to a phenomenon whose function is the production of some “disreputable” social effect. Either way, there is an imperative to preventing the phenomenon in question from performing its function.

A third kind of negative evaluation is, in many instances, parasitic on one or the other of the two I have discussed. Although both exotic agency and functional ascription offer ways to motivate negative evaluations of entities other than human persons, it is certainly possible to ground the negative evaluation of persons in these higher-level evaluations. I will call the considerations at play in such evaluations considerations of the *alignment of agency*.

On returning 10 years later to the arguments of *Emerging from the Chrysalis*, Lincoln distanced himself from the first edition’s claim that through female initiation rituals society acts in the interests of its own stability “rather than pursuing the specific interests of either gender” (Lincoln 1991, 94). His comments on this topic are instructive.

society is hardly a monolithic entity, but is rather a tense and potentially volatile amalgam of various subgroups... the members of which hold very different statuses from one another. Along with these different statuses come differential access to and control over wealth, power, prestige, and the mean through which these are produced, as well as differential access to and control over thought, speech, and the means through which these circulate and win acceptance, rituals included (Lincoln 1991, 117).

Lincoln’s purpose in this passage was to argue that, contrary to his earlier position, when society acts in the interest of its own stability, it also acts in the interests of “those groups that enjoy privileged positions” (“And with reference to gender, I

assume there are no serious doubts about just which group that might be”) and against the interests of others. Thus his immediate purpose here was to make it clear that the self-preserving actions of society have, among human persons, beneficiaries and victims. But the claims he offers to motivate this judgment seem to me to lead further than this modest conclusion. Lincoln claimed here that members of privileged groups have *more control* over the mechanisms through which society’s actions are executed. This claim offers resources for the ethical criticism of individual persons; for the suggestion, I take it, is that just as the *benefits* of society’s actions are disproportionately distributed among different social groups, so too is *responsibility* for those conditions. To say that the members of privileged groups have a greater degree of control than others over social conditions is to say that it is their decisions, more than those of other persons, that bring about or preserve the conditions that obtain. Thus if some bad social condition, such as the subjugation of women, obtains, the claim entails that it is the actions of the members of privileged groups, more than the actions of other persons, that have caused it to do so. Furthermore Lincoln’s claim entails that it is through these actions that the members of these privileged groups have, by promoting the subjugation of women, preserved their disproportionate privilege.

I take considerations of *alignment of agency* to be commonplace in our assessment of persons in a specific kind of situation: the situation in which their actions bring about some other agent’s goal. The evaluation of the member of a privileged group whose actions accomplish the intentions of society, it seems to me, have much in common with the evaluation of a high official whose actions accomplish the intentions of a king. Suppose we judge a king’s intention to bring about a certain result—say, the procurement of females for his sexual gratification—bad. The extent to which we extend this negative judgment to the official who actually procures the females will depend, in large measure, on whether we take the official to have been *aware* of the bad results that his actions would accomplish, on how much we think his choices *could have made a difference* to these results, and on whether he acted *willingly* or *unwillingly* in fulfilling the king’s demands. The greater the degree of alignment on such points between the proximate and the ultimate agents—between the official and the king, or between the member of the privileged group and the society—the stronger will be the rationale for extending the ethical judgment appropriate to the ultimate agent to the proximate agent.

Lincoln’s statements about the members of privileged classes parallel Marx’s way with capitalists and other members of the ruling classes. Like Lincoln, Marx did not ascribe ultimate responsibility for bad social conditions to individual persons: the actions of capitalists are determined by higher-level social conditions, such that even if it is by way of those actions that the working classes are kept in misery, in the main capitalists are no less ignorant of the role their actions play in the continued operation of capitalism than are workers.¹⁶ But in spite of the fact that

¹⁶“To prevent possible misunderstandings, let me say this. I do not by any means depict the capitalist and the landowner in rosy colours. But individuals are dealt with here only in so far as they are personifications of economic categories, the bearers of particular class-relations and interests. My

his theories present both capitalists and workers as creatures of the capitalist system, it was capitalists specifically whom Marx identified as “capital personified”: it was in the person of the capitalist that capital was, in his terms, “endowed with consciousness and a will”.¹⁷ The conclusion I draw from these observation is that the fact that an explanation ascribes ultimate responsibility for some bad social condition to some entity other than individual human beings, and thereby motivates a negative judgment concerning that entity, does not at all rule out the possibility that such judgment might attach as well to individual human persons; and in fact the pathways along which such ethical assessments travel from ultimate causes to proximate agents are intuitive.

Now it is important to note, for my purposes, that one crucial element of alignment is absent from Lincoln’s description of the members of privileged groups. Lincoln did not claim that the members of privileged groups *intend* either the subjugation of women or the preservation of their own privilege; nor did he claim that they are *aware* that their actions disproportionately bring about either of these conditions. In ascribing agency to societies Lincoln made it possible to ascribe this awareness and intentionality to societies themselves; and this explains, I think, why he condemned societies rather than the members of privileged classes as immoral. But it is also important to note that Lincoln also did not claim that the members of privileged classes *lack* the awareness and intentionality that would make moral condemnation appropriate. Rather, he left entirely open the issue of what motivates the members of privileged classes to act as they do.

I want to offer a concluding observation that will serve as a transition to the final part of my essay. In Lincoln’s example we are told that the members of privileged classes bring about the will of society through their actions and that doing so serves their self-interest; but we are not told whether or not they are aware of the role their actions play in society’s plans. It is possible that such persons might have the best of intentions in acting as they do, and that they are non-culpably ignorant of the bad consequences of their actions. The fact that Lincoln said nothing about the motivations of members of privileged classes means that it would be too strong a reading to ascribe to his text a tendency to motivate their moral condemnation; a charitable reading would withhold judgment until more information—specifically, about what the members of the privileged groups think they are doing—is forthcoming.

standpoint, from which the development of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history, can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he remains, socially speaking, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them.” Marx (1990, 92).

¹⁷ “Except as capital personified, the capitalist has no historical value.... But, insofar as he is capital personified, his motivating force is not the acquisition and enjoyment of use-values, but the acquisition and augmentation of exchange-values. He is fanatically intent on the valorization of value; consequently he ruthlessly forces the human race to produce for production’s sake.... In so far, therefore, as his actions are a mere function of capital—endowed as capital is, in his person, with consciousness and a will—his own private consumption counts as a robbery committed against the accumulation of his capital”. Marx (1990, 739).

It seems to me that if Lincoln's claims provide resources for the moral condemnation of the members of privileged groups, they stop short of providing *sufficient* resources. To have sufficient grounds for moral condemnation the reader of Lincoln's text will have to supply for herself the missing information about the psychologies of the members of privileged classes. About this state of affairs I have three comments. First, in leaving open the question of how the members of privileged classes understand their actions, Lincoln leaves his readers with an explanatory gap; for that the members of privileged classes should consistently act in ways that satisfy the desires of an agent different from themselves (society) is a puzzle if anything is (this, after all, is *the* puzzle to which Hegel's notion of the "cunning of reason" was supposed to be a solution). Second, perhaps the most intuitive explanation of why the members of privileged groups act in the relevant ways is that they want to preserve their own disproportionate privilege and are aware that this can be accomplished by preserving a social condition in which women are subjugated. And third, it is in virtue of the fact that he did not offer this intuitive explanation of the actions of members of privileged groups that Lincoln avoided offering a conspiracy theory of the subjugation of women.

8.4 Critique and Conspiracy: Reflections

So: there are a variety of ways for explanations of large-scale social phenomena to invoke agential causal forces of the requisite scale, tell a story of 'hiddenness', and generate significant negative ethical charge while at the same time avoiding conspiratorial ideation. Critical-theoretical explanations are not conspiracy theories by another name. But I do think that it matters that conspiracy theories and (some) critical academic discourses belong to the same genre, that of suspicious explanations, in virtue of the sorts of structural similarities described by Latour. In the final part of this essay I want to return to Latour's worry regarding "what has become of critique". The question is whether it is possible for non-conspiratorial explanations of large-scale social phenomena to display the same characteristics that motivate skepticism concerning the intellectual legitimacy of conspiracy theories. I will argue that this is in fact possible.

But first, an observation in the interest of due diligence is in order. Keeping a suspicious explanation clear of the apparatus of conspiracy requires clarity with respect to issues surrounding the role played by the agency of human persons. So one reliable way to offer an explanation of a large-scale social phenomenon that is not clearly free of whatever problems conspiracy theories have is to fail to be clear about these matters—to fail, that is, to make it clear that you are not postulating the existence of a conspiracy. So, for example, the claim that a collective entity (society, men, the bourgeoisie) aims at a certain end, unaccompanied by a translation into more precise terms, can be read as postulating conspiracy or exotic agency; it can also be read as a shorthand summary of the complex dynamics of multiple agencies whose reciprocal communication and activity establish the various conditions under

which each acts. And an explanation that claims that some social phenomenon has the function of serving the interests of some group of persons, but which does not address the question of whether those persons have a hand in the ordination of that social phenomenon to that end, will be susceptible to interpretation in just those terms.

Edward Said’s *Orientalism* offers a good example of this dynamic. Bernard Lewis opened his 1982 *New York Review* response to Said with a parable about group of Greek patriots charging classical scholars with “a deep and evil conspiracy, incubated for centuries, hatched in Western Europe, fledged in America, the purpose of which is to denigrate the Greek achievement and subjugate the Greek lands and peoples” (Lewis 1982). In the Afterword to the second edition Said protested against the conspiratorial reading of his arguments, rightly, in my view—or perhaps only nearly rightly (Said 1994, 345).

On my reading *Orientalism* is not clearly a conspiracy theory; but neither is it clearly not a conspiracy theory. One passage in particular positions the thesis of the book squarely in the territory between unambiguous conspiracy theories and unambiguously nonconspiratorial suspicious explanations. Orientalism, according to Said, is not “representative and expressive of some nefarious ‘Western’ plot to hold down the ‘Oriental’ world”. And yet

It is, rather than expresses, a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world; it is, above all, a discourse that... is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by power political... power intellectual... power cultural... power moral (Said 1994, 13).

So orientalism does not ‘express’ or ‘represent’ a collective project of dominating and denigrating the orient; but it is, Said wrote a few pages later, “a kind of willed human work” (Said 1994, 15). I think hermeneutical charity prohibits us from thinking that the “will” that orientalism is the will of orientalists, or that it was orientalists who “willed” the work that orientalism does; for this would be to read *Orientalism* as a conspiracy theory. But neither did Said say whose will orientalism is. Had he not expressly stated that orientalism is not a nefarious Western plot, I am not sure that we would have figured this out on our own. And if his response to Lewis indicates that Said did not think that *Orientalism* presented a conspiracy theory, he did not offer much in the way of guidance as to how to read the book otherwise.

Now I do not think that the only reasons an author might have for failing to be clear about such matters are such things as evasiveness or a weak grasp on the relevant theoretical issues. Consider a passage from Berger’s *The Sacred Canopy*. Berger chose to use the language of agency to render the core notion of social function accessible: he invited his readers to imagine “a fully aware founder of a society, a kind of combination of Moses and Machiavelli”, casting about for a recipe for the perpetuation of the established social order. Such a figure might well resolve, “Let the institutional order be so interpreted as to hide, as much as possible, its *constructed* character. Let that which has been stamped out of the ground *ex nihilo*

appear as the manifestation of something that has been existent from the beginning of time... In sum, set up religious legitimations". In commenting on this choice of idiom, Berger further commented, "And, actually, the example of Moses-Machiavelli figuring the whole thing out with cool deliberation may not be as fanciful as all that. There have been very cool minds indeed in the history of religion" (Berger 1969, 33).

A passage from Cohen amplifies this point. "When Marxists venture functionalist explanations of ideological and superstructural phenomena," he remarked in *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, "they are often accused of espousing a 'conspiracy theory of history'." In a statement prefiguring the exchange between Lewis and Said, Cohen observed that the Marxist theorist "sometimes tries to forestall the response by disclaiming an assertion of conspiracy, but too commonly he fails to say in what other fashion phenomena like those mentioned are explained by the functions they serve." In Cohen's view this forestalling is not always well advised: "Marxists can be too sensitive to the charge that they perceive conspiracies. There is more collective design in history than an inflexible rejection of 'conspiracy theories' would allow, and richer scope for purposive elaboration of Marxian functional theses than that posture recognizes" (Cohen 2000, 289f).

So one answer to Latour's question—the question of why critical theory sometimes resembles conspiracy theories—is just that the explanations involved can leave unanswered crucial questions about the role they attribute to human agency. Theorists who offer suspicious explanations of large-scale social while being unclear about such matters fail to make it evident that they are offering something distinct from a conspiracy theory. And in some cases this will be because in fact they are not—because they leave open, sometimes with full intentionality, the question of whether what operates beneath what is visible is in fact conspiracy.

I turn now to my final topic. Consider the question of whether there is something wrong with conspiracy theories—some feature of conspiracy theories such that acceptance of one is a sign of some sort of intellectual or moral failing. To set up for this discussion, recall Latour's question: "What if explanations resorting automatically to power, society, discourse had outlived their usefulness and deteriorated to the point of now feeding the most gullible sort of critique?"

Brian Keeley has argued that the problem with some conspiracy theories—what legitimates the characterization of some conspiracy theories as unwarranted (UCT, for Unwarranted Conspiracy Theories)—is the increasing scale of intentional deception that they need to postulate in order to deal with growth in the body of evidence that does not suggest the existence of the conspiracy (Keeley 1999). If the media, nominally tasked with uncovering hidden truths, have not reported on the existence of the conspiracy, this is because they too are part of it; similarly for the government, nominally tasked with protecting the well-being of its citizens, and for the otherwise respected academic who has looked into the question and declared the conspiracy theory baseless. Keeley argues that to the extent that it is unreasonable to believe in the existence of massive and co-ordinated deception on the part of large numbers of otherwise uncoordinated persons, the reasonableness of accepting a conspiracy theory decreases as the scale of the deception it needs to postulate in the face of recalcitrant evidence increases.

I think that there is something correct about this claim, but I want to develop Keeley’s position using different language. I understand a signature disadvantage of conspiracy theories to be their low level of prior probability, in Bayesian terms; more colloquially, their low plausibility.¹⁸ Conspiracy theories typically offer a high degree of explanatory power, which if all goes well is sufficient to counterbalance the disadvantage of low initial plausibility. We can understand Keeley’s criticism to be premised on the notion that the *plausibility* of the conspiracy theories decreases as the scale of the intentional deception it postulates increases while its *explanatory power*, relative to that of non-conspiratorial explanations, remains the same (because both kinds of explanation predict that evidence for the existence of the theory will be lacking in the areas in question), to the point where the theory becomes so massively implausible that accepting it is simply irrational.

Now judgments of plausibility are made not in a rational vacuum but, canonically for Bayesian theory, against a body of background knowledge. And the contents of background knowledge differ among different contexts, such that the plausibility of claims will be assessed differently in different contexts. Richard Miller has coined the term ‘principles of normal tendency’ to refer to elements of background knowledge that are relevant to judgments of this kind (see Miller 1987, 210–12). Principles of normal tendency are claims as to what types of desires, thinking, or behavior are normal for some person or phenomenon. Examples are: Jews look out for each other; Swiss watches are well made; women are highly emotional; postmodernists employ rhetorical subterfuge to accomplish that which cannot be accomplished through reasoned argument; large corporations skirt the law; climate scientists follow the grant money. Accepting or rejecting such principles will make a difference for one’s assessment of some explanations. A person who believes that Jews look out for each other will regard a claim that some Jews have gone to considerable trouble to defend persons to whom they are connected only by a shared Jewish identity as more plausible, because less unexpected, than will someone who does not believe this. For the person inclined to certain understandings of what goes on in the fields of journalism and government, the thought that the members of such fields might have a hand in suppressing the truth will occasion no surprise.

We now have the resources to unpack Latour’s term “gullible critique”. If we understand gullibility as a disposition to believe implausible things (or, more broadly, things that one ought not believe) on the basis of the testimony of others, then there are conceivable cases in which gullibility explains why people accept principles of normal tendency—statements to the effect that “those people are like that/that impersonal phenomenon is like that”. The term “gullible critique”, then, would apply to cases in which a person’s acceptance of a suspicious explanation is a product of her *gullibly* accepting the principle(s) of normal tendency that renders that explanation sufficiently plausible as to warrant serious consideration. I think

¹⁸ My thinking on these points is most heavily indebted to Miller (1987), in particular chapters 4–7, Miller’s own rejection of Bayesianism notwithstanding.

this rendering captures the sense of epistemic impropriety behind Latour's remarks. I take him to have expressed the worry that some productions of "critical theory" warrant dismissal by anyone who does not accept certain claims about how certain parts of the world works, and that those claims are such that only the gullible will accept them.

I want to broaden the range of this worry by speaking of an epistemic dynamic that is subtler than 'gullibility', and which allows for a final comparison between critical theory and conspiracy theories. There are more interesting things to be said about principles of normal tendency than that different persons accept different ones. Such principles are perfectly capable of serving as distinctive cultural identity markers. That is to say: it is possible for forms of cultural identity to be premised on shared expectations about the members of other groups, such that authentic membership requires accepting certain principles of normal tendency about others, and questioning such principles will call one's cultural bona fides into question. I strongly suspect that there are, for example, Christian communities in this country where claims to the effect that Muslims *qua* Muslims desire harm to Christians *qua* Christians circulate freely, and that those who raise challenges to such claims do so at some cost to their standing within the community. It also seems to me that claims about the influence of financial self-interest on the part of climate scientists, the perfidiousness of politicians, and the like are the sorts of things that frequently mark subcultural identities. There are, I think, subcultures where expressing one's attitude towards such claims would mark one as either 'one of us' or 'not one of us'.

To the extent that a salient principle of normal tendency becomes a cultural identity marker, a person's assessment of the plausibility of a distinctly conspiratorial suspicious explanation will be intimately connected to their cultural identity commitments. The members of the imagined Christian community just described will be more receptive to claims about sinister Muslim conspiracies than will others, because they will not regard the postulated desires and behaviors as out of character for Muslims. And those on the outside of this community, inasmuch as they do not accept the claim about the characteristic desires of Muslims, will regard the acceptance of such claims as evidence that the thinking of the members of this group is powerfully affected by factors connected to cultural identity formation and maintenance.

Now suppose there are certain academic subcultures for whom particular principles of normal tendency are identity markers. Suppose, for example, that the term 'Freudian' refers to the members of an intellectual subculture, one defined in part by assent to certain principles of normal tendency involving, say, the power of sexual motives and of mechanisms self-deception. Suppose that these principles of normal tendency are *recognizably* 'Freudian'—that it is broadly recognized that Freudians generally accept these and non-Freudians generally do not. And suppose, finally, that there are some explanations of large-scale social phenomena that will be rejected as massively implausible by anyone who does not accept these principles.

The person who regards this academic example as a robust analog to the religious example from the previous paragraph will be the one who is willing to suppose that the dynamics of cultural (or sub-cultural) identity formation and

maintenance explain why group members accept the relevant principles of normal tendency *in both cases*. I take it that this view is an attractive one for a variety of reasons, primary among which is that supposing that the dynamics of identity operates in this way within the academy would explain the theoretical Balkanization that defines the humanities. But for the moment my point is that it seems to me that, at its deepest level, Latour's worry is informed by the thought that perhaps the term 'critical theory' now picks out an academic subculture within which circulate principles of normal tendency to which the wider world is overwhelmingly indifferent, in precisely the same way that he was indifferent to the views about Mossad and the CIA that his neighbor took to be common knowledge among those not beset by disabling naïveté.

I promised that my investigation of the similarities between conspiracy theories and critical academic discourses would partly explain why questions of intellectual legitimacy hang over the latter within the wider academy. Here, then, is my partial explanation. It seems to me that any academic who is paying attention is aware that the academy is divided into distinct subcultures, and that one of the things that divides subcultures are divergent views regarding how our world works—regarding how people (perhaps certain kinds of people) work, how institutions work, how societies work. It also seems to me that, for better or worse, critical academic discourses are often regarded as the property of a recognizable, if loose, academic subculture, defined by commitment to variations on the themes that 'appearances are deceiving', that people's real motivations are usually less praiseworthy than the ones to which they will confess, and that academic marginality is often a product of the operation of mechanisms for the suppression of the truth. I think it likely that for many academics, this subcultural status of "critical theory" has the result that the productions of that field no more command their respect than do conspiracy theories, and for the same reasons: they regard as markers of subcultural identity the principles of normal tendency that render these theories sufficiently plausible as to warrant serious consideration, and do not themselves accept them.

My final remark is that there is something unfortunate about this state of affairs. I have little confidence that the processes whereby principles of normal tendency become definitive of some subcultures and scorned elsewhere is sensitive to the truth or falsity of those principles. Freudianism can have become a marginal academic subculture and yet be the place where the truth about us resides; and the same might be true for any critical academic discourse. The problem with one such variant may not be that it is committed to false ideas about the way human beings and society work, but rather that history has moved on from the point where such ideas had a potential audience outside of narrow circles. I think that the first duty of responsible inquiry in this situation is to identify the principles of normal tendency on which suspicious explanations depend and to address directly (and honestly) the question of what reason there is to think that these are true (and such is my request of any self-identified critical theorist who might be reading). But for the professionally marginalized critical theorist who is justifiably satisfied that her principles of normal tendency are true (and I do not doubt that this is often the case), there is no other way forward than to resign oneself to the posture of the faithful remnant,

awaiting the day when the world will realize that you and your tradition were right, and unjustly despised, all along. To this situation, it seems to me, Horkheimer spoke with some eloquence:

In the general historical upheaval the truth may reside with numerically small groups of men. History teaches us that such groups, hardly noticed even by those opposed to the status quo, outlawed but imperturbable, may at the decisive moment become the leaders because of their deeper insight (Horkheimer 1992, 241).

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Chapter 9

Learning to Do Philosophy of Religion in the Anthropocene



Mark Larrimore

[Gaia's] blind and implacable transcendence is what specifically questions our own tales and refrains. Our world, which retroactively presupposed she would remain the stable support for the Olympian Gods, and for the Humans who expelled those Gods from the scene, is already part of the past, even if we do not know what that means.

Isabelle Stengers (2014, 5)

Abstract The philosophy of religion and emerging discussions of the Anthropocene have barely taken notice of each other. This chapter engages recent work by critic Roy Scranton, postcolonial novelist Amitav Ghosh, sociologist Bronislaw Szerszynski and multi-species anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose to explore what role the philosophy of religion of the future might play in a world where the vertiginous loss of long taken-for-granted futures leaves us in an uncanny territory haunted by Holocene ghosts and spooked by Anthropocene monsters. It is suggested that the philosophy of religion's understanding of histories and traditions of interpretation can free great text humanisms from paleological thinking, but that this will require relinquishing the illusory comforts of secular modernity's immanent frame. Discerning the spectres of a post-secular present may lead philosophy of religion into conversation with speculative futurological fiction and with the environmental humanities' experiments in mourning and making kin of our fragile more-than-human world. The chapter ends with some prognostications about how Anthropocene reframings of agency, temporality and the significance of the human might reshape traditional philosophy of religion topics like the problem of evil (and a revived problem of good), and may draw provocative new meanings out of classic philosophical and religious texts such as the Book of Job.

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9.1 Introduction

The question of the future of the philosophy of religion is a faith question. It's a question about our faith in the future of religion itself. Has it a future, and will we be able to grasp it? The future is an awkward question for the academic study of religion generally, and may be so especially for the philosophy of religion given the retrospective nature of philosophical reflection. Most of two centuries has passed since Hegel's owl of Minerva; many of the standard questions of our field are older still. Our reflections scan only a small part of the history of human religious articulations. It may be time to become comfortable with the risks of thinking the future, for it is here already, staggeringly different from the familiar futures of the recent history we study. Long taken-for-granted futures turn out to have been knocked out by unremarked pasts; the present itself can seem an absence. Increasingly, we regard our world as haunted by extinction, including our imminent own, in what W. J. T. Mitchell has called the "paleological present." (Bubandt 2017, 137) Increasingly, too, we see the unfolding debacle as our own doing, for human beings have become a geological force (Chakrabarty 2009).

This chapter probes the challenge to philosophy of religion of the "Anthropocene," the notion that humanity has become a planetary force, its disruptive effects measurable even by geologists. "Anthropocene" is a term atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen popularized in 2000, though it had been used by others before. Stratigraphers, noting "the striking acceleration since the mid-20th century of carbon dioxide emissions and sea level rise, the global mass extinction of species, and the transformation of land by deforestation and development," have proposed 1950 as a measurable starting point of this new epoch, deceptive though this specificity may seem. (Carrington 2016)¹ Widely different starts for the proposed "Age of Man" have been bruited, from the human-caused extinction of megafauna to agriculture, from the industrial revolution to the atomic age. What is clear is that the unusually stable Holocene of the last twelve millennia is coming to an end, an end hastened by anthropogenic factors.

Important criticisms have been made of the term "Anthropocene," not least for its lumping together the minority responsible for climate-affecting industrialization and consumption and the majority who are already bearing the brunt of the disruption. Whitney Bauman (2015) has brought the most telling of these critiques together in arguing that the abstractness of "Anthropocene" locks us into precisely those patterns of behavior which caused the problem in the first place. Other theorists have proposed other names: capitalocene, plantationocene, Chthulucene. (Haraway 2015) To keep our focus directed to the particular patches where anthropogenic harm explodes – also the optimal sites for engaged response – feminist anthropolo-

¹ Geologists' not quite linear approach to history is helpfully explained in Zalasiewicz (2017).

gist Anna Tsing (2015) has argued that “Anthropocene” can be put to work *polemically*. Instead of losing ourselves in hubristic dithering,² we need to attend to linked but always local “outbreaks of Man.”

Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) argued that the idea of humans as planetary agents explodes understanding of human agency, undermining the distinction between natural and cultural history, in 2009. Since then Anthropocene theorists have been making arguments which seem religiously resonant. Philosophers like Isabelle Stengers describe a newly unnerved relationship of humanity to our planet, which now “intrudes” on our “tales and refrains” like an implacable and indifferent goddess, confronting us with an unassimilable “transcendence.” (Stengers 2014, Latour 2017) The editors of the recent *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* find “something mythlike” in the work of “think[ing] geological, biological, chemical, and cultural activity together, as a network of interactions with shared histories and unstable futures”; in it “we consider anew the living and the dead; the ability to speak with invisible and cosmic beings; and the possibility of the end of the world.” (Tsing et al. 176) There are echoes of a Fall, of original sin, of karma. And yet the Anthropocene literature barely notices the religions we study at all.³ Philosophers of religion have largely returned the favor.

In this chapter I explore what might be called Anthropocene studies with an eye to contributions we philosophers of religion might make. I focus on the work of four theorists, working in widely different disciplinary environments, whose critiques of received genres and recommendations for how to respond to the Anthropocene seem particularly relevant to our work. Critic Roy Scranton argues for the disillusioning work the philosophical humanities can play in weaning us from an unsustainable civilization. Postcolonial novelist Amitav Ghosh offers a critique of modern literature as structurally incapable of doing justice to climate change, in terms which apply also to other forms of modern thought. Sociologist Bronislaw Szerszynski calls attention to the post-secular nature of Anthropocene experience through speculative accounts of emergent religious formations. Finally multi-species anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose brings us back to the earth and to the precarious webs in which our living happens.

Each theorist’s work has openings for philosophy of religion, but we shall have to invite ourselves in. Like these thinkers in other disciplines, we shall have to question our reliance on outmoded and unsustainable frameworks and narratives. Some, such as the “immanent frame” Charles Taylor finds to be constitutive of our “secular age,” will come to look like fantasies of the “carbon humanities.” (Wark 2015)⁴ We may find philosophy’s eternal present fatally careless of the relationships with mortal earthly kin on which our life has always depended. The final part of the chapter

²“The Dithering” is the name given the period 2005–2060 in Kim Stanley Robinson’s novel *2312* (2012).

³Exception is made for ancient polytheisms and presumably timeless indigenous traditions. Representative is the “Manual” to Klingan et al. (2014), which jumps from the gods of Greece and Rome to Giordano Bruno with no more than a subordinate clause referring to monotheism.

⁴I am grateful to my colleague McKenzie Wark for introducing me to the challenges and importance of making sense of the Anthropocene.

risks some prognostications, imagining ways in which these and other Anthropocene concerns might reshape our practice, first in reflecting on the problem of evil, and then in interpreting a classic religious text about the loss of worldly certainties, the Book of Job.

9.2 Interruption: Roy Scranton

A good way into the emerging multidisciplinary discourse of the Anthropocene is Roy Scranton's *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization* (2015b). Based on a 2013 essay of the same title originally published in the *New York Times* philosophy column "The Stone," Scranton's *cri de coeur* was many people's introduction to the idea of the Anthropocene. It is a stark account of climatic collapse and the unlikeliness of our rising to the occasion of responding to it. The uncomfortable truth: "this civilization is already dead." (2015b, 23) If we are to slow or change the course of further anthropogenic calamity, we will need to learn to accept the death of all we have come to value. This "learning to die" requires "a newly philosophical humanism, undergirded by renewed attention to the humanities," for the humanities are the custodians of memory, "the only thing that can save those who are already dead." (2015b, 19, 95) Philosophy plays a decisive part precisely for its backward-looking character.

Scranton frames his account of the climate crisis in terms of a long view history of humanity which opens out, in a final rapturous finale, to a long view of the history of the universe. The story of early humans is shaped decisively by climate events, warmings and coolings. It takes some time for the relative clemency of the Holocene to arrive, bringing with it confidence in the world as a stable platform for human projects, and in nature – including human nature – as harmonious. Yet our progress-bedazzled efforts, especially in the past two centuries' industrial-scale movement of carbon from beneath the ground into the atmosphere, are hastening the end of this age. The sixth wave of extinctions – which may wind up including us – has begun.

From a survey of alarming scientific discoveries and projections Scranton moves to a sobering account of the political barriers to an effective response. Human instincts of fight or flight will produce only varieties of denial and scapegoating. Politics cannot save us, and capitalism certainly not. The increasing precarity of life in the Anthropocene will rather reacquaint us with the inevitability of conflict which Heraclitus still knew. What's needed to stop our carbon-intoxicated rush is the "humanist thinker: the one who is willing to stop and ask troublesome questions, the one who is willing to interrupt." (2015b, 24) The philosopher is particularly good at "interrupt[ing] the perpetual circuits of fear, aggression, crisis, and reaction that continually prod us to ever more intense levels of manic despair" (2015b, 86)⁵.

⁵ Scranton credits Peter Sloterdijk for this understanding of the vocation of the philosopher.

Philosophical humanism in its most radical practice is the disciplined interruption of somatic and social flows, the detachment of consciousness from impulse, and the condensation of conceptual truths out of the granular data of experience. It is the study of “dying and being dead,” a divestment from *this* life in favor of deeper investments in a life beyond ourselves (2015b, 91).

Scranton quotes from a fascinating array of sources ancient and modern, including no small number of religious classics. These are able to interrupt poisonous contemporary pieties because they are links to worlds of humans already dead.

The book ends with a remarkable apotheosis, a flash of *amor fati*. To die, to accept death, is to recognize that we cannot change, cannot even really imagine the needful changes.⁶ But this need not be depressing or debilitating; it offers a sense of peace and connection, an opening for “patience, reflection, and love.” (2015b, 27) The book’s final pages chronicle the rise of what Scranton calls “photohumanism,” a humanities attuned to the ways new media allow us to be nodes in webs of reference and resonance, instantaneously reflecting and refracting the ideas of others. “[H]umanity has revealed itself as collective energy, light swarming across a darkened planet.” (2015b, 107) In his dazzling dénouement Scranton connects this with the primacy of light in the story of the universe. The *Bhagavad Gita* is quoted: “Know that through lucid knowledge/one sees in all creatures/a single, unchanging existence, /undivided within its divisions.” The Book of Proverbs, too: “The human spirit is the lamp of God, searching all the innermost parts.” (2015b, 115)⁷ Our civilization may be dead, but through our participation in light we are part of something much greater. Because it was never alive, it can never die.

Religion is among the fireworks at Scranton’s end of the world, but this unexpectedly warming coda has no place for living religion, which is evidently among those “denials of death” (following Ernest Becker) that have made civilization so toxic. (2015b, 90) There is, nevertheless, a god-sized space in Scranton’s argument:

To have this moment, as you breathe and read, everything that happened for the last thirteen billion years had to happen exactly the way it did. Not a single atom can have been out of place, not a single muon faulty. Nothing went wrong. No mistakes were made. There was no sin, no error, no fall. There was only necessity. ... If, like a god, we could see every photon’s arc and each neutrino’s wobble, we would see past and future laid out in a single mathematical design; infinite, determined, perfect (2015b, 116–17).

There is something religious about this (rather seventeenth century) epiphany, even without a god’s omniscient witness.

There are several points where philosophers of religion might engage Scranton’s argument. The history of religious philosophy is full of “interruptive” practices, from negative theology to paradoxes to kōans, many of them relativizations of the present. We might also breathe life into the religious classics mentioned – indeed, show that they are breathing, still. Within those traditions, raised to the level of theology and narrative and sublimed in rituals, one can find many of the concerns

⁶Scranton (2015a) argues that Zen Buddhism helps us face the most difficult question: “how will we choose to live out our inevitable failure?”

⁷Cf. *Bhagavad Gita* 18.20, Proverbs 20:27.

Scranton tries to evoke, especially about the difficulty of accepting that we are not masters of our world. An engagement with the life of these traditions, including the multiple ironies of institutionalizing interruption, could disrupt both the denial-laced confidence of those who think it's time to turbocharge anthropogenic climate change and the despair of those who think the game is already lost.

But we can learn something also from the limitations of the classic texts which are Scranton's philosopher's stones. Even in its moments of Spinozan immortality, Scranton sees us as always already dead. Our true function – lighting up briefly – is like the incineration of fossil fuels. The very account of the work of philosophical humanism as interruption, detachment and condensation sounds – deliberately? – like the extraction of oil or natural gas. It points to a way of thinking about the legacies of the humanities consonant with the world cracked open by fossil fuels, if not indeed shaped by it. Life, which long ago laid down the beds of vegetal matter which became our fossil fuels, has its consummation and its redemption not in the living but in that posthumous moment, a brief interruptive flash, when our fossilized souls spark light. Great books humanism may have been paleological from its origin in nineteenth century American universities. The philosophy of religion of the future can help us accept death, and rebirth, too.

9.3 Beyond Modern Framing: Amitav Ghosh

If Scranton cannot imagine a role for religion beyond the lode of classic texts which have found their way into the world civ canon, Amitav Ghosh finds religion on the ground today to be our best hope for drawing back from the brink. This may be a gesture of despair as much as of hope. It comes in the last pages of his *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2017), when the prospects for cultural or political response adequate to the challenges of the Anthropocene have been found to be dim. Rather than answering his perhaps rhetorical call to be saved by religion, the philosophy of religion of the future might learn from the central argument of Ghosh's study, his trenchant account of the limitations of modern cultural production.

The Great Derangement has a structure similar to Scranton's. The usual mechanisms for defining and responding to collective problems have been blown apart by climate change. The nation state system in particular seems constitutionally unable to respond. Ecologically devastating ideals of growth and national prosperity, which Asian colonial subjects were among the first to recognize as unsustainable or extendable to all people in the world, are now embraced by leaders in Asia too. Social movements unaffiliated with nation states or capital may be our only hope – especially religious ones.

[R]eligious worldviews are not subject to the limitations that have made climate change such a challenge for our existing institutions of governance: they transcend nation-states, and they all acknowledge intergenerational, long-term responsibilities; they do not partake of economistic ways of thinking and are therefore capable of imagining nonlinear change—

catastrophe, in other words Finally, it is impossible to see any way out of this crisis without an acceptance of limits and limitations, and this in turn, is, I think, ultimately related to the idea of the sacred, however one may wish to conceive of it (Ghosh 2017, 160–61).

Modern theory of religion might make us less sanguine about the potential of “religion” to undo the ravages of a nation-state system with which it is arguably codependent. Ghosh’s faith in it seems more feigned than real anyway; he says nothing more about the “sacred” than this. But Ghosh’s critique of his own genre in meeting the challenge of “accept[ing] limits and limitations” in the Anthropocene suggests the need for vigilance in the philosophy of religion, too.

Like other Anthropocene writers Ghosh, too, imagines a view from the future, in this case observers astonished that at the time of the Anthropocene “most forms of art and literature were drawn into the modes of concealment that prevented people from recognizing the realities of their plight.” (2017, 11) It is this loss of integrity which he calls the “great derangement.” Ghosh’s main topic is the novel, and his main question is its adequacy in addressing or even engaging something on the scale of climate change. Writing in part as a novelist himself, Ghosh suggests that there is something in the literary novel *structurally* unsuited for responding to climate change. For in order to establish the “world” of a novel, the writer must cauterize its borders with the world of catastrophic and unpredictable events.

Novels ... conjure up worlds that become real precisely because of their finitude and distinctiveness. Within the mansion of serious fiction, no one will speak of how the continents were created; nor will they refer to the passage of thousands of years; connections and events on this scale appear not just unlikely but also absurd within the delimited horizon of a novel ... But the earth of the Anthropocene is precisely a world of insistent, inescapable continuities, animated by forces that are nothing if not inconceivably vast (2017, 61–62).

Ghosh suggests that older genres like “epic and myths” were able to imagine extraordinary and epochal events (2017, 128) – lives ever affected by the “continuities” of our world with worlds of non- and super-human agency. The novel, however, frames its worlds in ways which make this impossible. Much of the artistry of the novelist is her defining and stabilizing a “setting” and “period,” a frame within which plausibly improbable events shape believable and resonant plots. “[T]he irony of the ‘realist’ novel,” Ghosh observes wryly, is that “the very gestures with which it conjures up reality are actually a concealment of the real” (2017, 23).

The novel shares the nineteenth century’s rejection of “catastrophism as un-modern,” making it kin to the gradualist understandings of change emerging from Lyell’s geology, Darwin’s evolution and the “invention of probability” chronicled by Ian Hacking. (2017, 22) “Probability and the modern novel ... work as vessels for the containment of the same kind of experience,” Ghosh argues. (2017, 16) The absence of anything like agency in the background of human history and destiny is also part of the story. The encounter with non-human agents like tigers is “uncanny” in ways the novel cannot contain – and so generally avoids. How much more uncanny, then, would be the experience of estranged, aggregated *human* agency refracted through anthropogenic natural events? (2017, 31–33).

Ghosh uses a phrase from John Updike to name the focus which he thinks prevents the novel from engaging a larger world of uncanny continuities: the sense of “individual moral adventure – of the evolving individual in varied and roughly equal battle with a world of circumstance.” (2017, 77)⁸ But “individual moral adventure” also characterizes much of the modern way in religion, in theologies and philosophies and even in the strains of “lived religion” currently in vogue. A natural environment for human striving which might not be the same tomorrow as it was yesterday challenges all Axial Age philosophies, even those committed to the openness of the event. That this environment may be changed because of unmoored human agency is more unimaginable still. We should see Charles Taylor’s “immanent frame” as a kindred artifact to the novel, constructed over mounting empirical objections and ultimately a dodge from the realities of the Anthropocene. (Taylor 2007, 542) Putatively secular selves seem to themselves “buffered,” in part because of the cultural products of the great derangement. Modern culture renders our porosity unthinkable.⁹

There is in fact no shortage of novels which tell of worlds coming apart and radically out of joint, but Ghosh shares literary fiction’s distaste for them. He justifies his dismissal of “genre fiction” (including science fiction) with Margaret Atwood’s observation that speculative literature’s “imagined other worlds [are] located somewhere apart from our everyday one: in another time, in another dimension.” (2017, 71) However Atwood’s works, and those of writers like Kim Stanley Robinson, Liu Cixin and N. K. Jemisin, are among the most serious engagements with shifting frames and reconstituting agencies – Ghosh’s “continuities.”

Indeed, the literary novels Ghosh can’t quit seem guiltier of the charge. “Science fiction is more, not less, ‘realist’ than literary fiction,” McKenzie Wark has argued. “It does not produce the fiction of a severed part of a world, as if the rest was predictable from the part. It produces a fiction of a whole different world as real,” and so cultivates in us a complex sense of a “third temporality” beyond one-dimensional conceptions of the gradual or the catastrophic. (Wark 2017) The philosophy of religion of the future will do well to learn from Ghosh how to escape the blinders of the immanent frame. Transnational religious movements may illuminate paths beyond the chimeras of secular nationalism and capital. But imaginative works – perhaps precisely the “genre fiction” Ghosh is troubled by – may be indispensable partners, too.

9.4 Postsecular Anthropocene: Bronislaw Szerszynski

Powerful examples of the work speculative fiction can do in engaging the religious import of the Anthropocene are the “theory fictions” of sociologist Bronislaw Szerszynski. These works of futurological scholarship – written in the future about

⁸The phrase appears in Updike’s review of Abdel Rahman Munif’s *Cities of Salt*.

⁹For “buffered” and “porous” selves see Taylor (2007), 27–42. Disconcertingly, the otherwise exquisite essays commissioned for the tenth anniversary of the Taylor-inspired SSRC website “The Immanent Frame,” responding to the prompt “Is this all there is?” barely notice the non-human world, let alone its anthropogenic travails. <https://tif.ssrc.org/category/is-this-all-there-is/>.

the future, and about the present we can't see – upend understandings of Anthropocene reality which register no more a spiraling loss of narrative. Szerszynski's recent essays "From the Anthropocene Epoch to a New Axial Age: Using Theory-Fictions to Explore Geo-Spiritual Futures" (2017a) and "Gods of the Anthropocene: Geo-Spiritual Formations in the Earth's New Epoch" (2017b) challenge us to imagine the future more boldly, and the present too. The future may prove a better vantage for understanding our dislocated present than the best predictions of an immortal past.

In the first essay Szerszynski discusses the power of what he calls "theory fictions" to shake us out of obsolete pieties (including the distinction between theory and fiction!).¹⁰ Interesting for our purposes is his well-aimed criticism of those who sense or desire a "New Axial Age" that is really just a revival of the supposed original, and problematic in all the ways these transcendence-focused traditions have proven to be. Lynn White's famous critique of Christianity's implication in the climate crisis really applies to all the Axial Age traditions. (2017a, 37) In the not too distant future of his theory fictions, Szerszynski imagines humans will have settled the rest of the solar system and made contact with other forms of life beyond it. A *Second Axial Age* will transcend the limitations of the first. Future "historian of religion Julia Viñas" will write:

Whereas the First Axial Age typically understood the infinite in science, religion and ethics as background, origin or command respectively – fundamentally, as an *exteriority* – the Second Axial Age started to find the vertiginous experience of the infinite as an *interiority* within things themselves as they engaged in the great dance of self-organisation. No longer was the infinite seen as standing *outside* the empirical world, thereby constituting the latter as a bounded, finite unity. Now, the infinite was conceived and experienced as situated *inside* that world, as an inherent aspect of its apparent finitude, thus shattering its unity into boundless difference. If we can still speak of religion as forming a separate sphere in the new Axial Age, it was one that came to be dominated not by the immanence–transcendence couplet of the First Axial Age, but by what became called 'intranscendence' ... a new spiritual apperception of the endless, active difference within things (2014, 152–53).

This new orientation will manifest in new formations of existing religious traditions. Viñas is analyzing a new form of Tantric Buddhism which emerges on a terraformed Mars, one of whose features is a veneration of Mars and Earth as life-giving "geo-spiritual" forces, as bodhisattva and consort.

Szerszynski's theory fictions inspire reflection on the future of religion (and philosophy), but his work also suggests we may already be living in a world unmoored from the still Axial Age-shaped imaginaries of modern religion. Weaving together theories from the philosophical social sciences, natural sciences and recent anthropological studies of religion, he argues that emergent Anthropocene reality doesn't just confound the distinction between nature and culture, but also the distinction between the sacred and the secular. Working with ideas from Bataille, Serres, Deleuze and Guattari, Szerszynski announces that we can already see the emergence of a number of new "high gods" from our not so disenchanted world – as well as "lower spirits" generated as the former violate local practices in the name of

¹⁰ Szerszynski has so far published three linked "theory fictions": Szerszynski (2014, 2015, 2017c).

abstract values. By gods he means “any embodied or disembodied non-human agency that is experienced, interacted with or is otherwise socially consequential but is not (or not always) mapped onto a single body of the kind that is recognized by Western ‘naturalism’ as capable of consciousness or agency.” (2017b, 255) Most of these “gods” are not objects of self-consciously religious devotion but arise in the practice of putatively secular theories of the Anthropocene.

Szerszynski suggests that at least six “high gods of the Anthropocene” have already manifested themselves. (2017b, 258–62) *Anthropos* is the recently discovered species agent capable of making and remaking the planet, and perhaps of surviving beyond and without it. *Capital* is the trans-human agency to which Marxists and others point in critiquing the humanism of “Anthropocene” imagining. The *Sun* is the actual source of all earthly energy, which it offers in an indifferent and overwhelming abundance which can be experienced as tyrannical. *Earth*, too, whether celebrated as Pachamama, as Donna Haraway’s tentacular Chthulus or as the unapproachable Gaia of Stengers and Bruno Latour, affects people as a high god as it shrugs off human collaboration and meaning-making.

Into this company comes what seems at first a familiar figure, *Yahweh or Allah*. There is a pacific form in phenomena like *Laudato si’*, calling us to resist the temptations of the Anthropocene. (This corresponds to the religious movements in which Ghosh places his hope.) Yet “globally such churches are in decline, in favour of new, ‘hard’ apocalyptic monotheisms,” which offer a wrathful face of this god in “deny[ing] the existence of geological time yet demand[ing] an accelerated rush into Anthropocene destruction.” (2017b, 260–61) A sixth god, finally, is the *Cosmos*, understood as the larger whole of which our whole solar system—not to mention the fleeting farce of human thought—is an entirely insignificant part, fated to disappear without remainder or regret. Meanwhile the “laminar” flows—powerful and unidirectional—of “high gods” generate and compete with “turbulent” flows in the localities they despoil, calling forth “cannibals, vampires and devils.”

In Szerszynski’s dynamic and disturbed landscape of implacable and often wrathful agencies, Taylor’s buffered self seems an act of desperate fantasy. Aware of our porosity in unfathomable new ways, human beings – stunned, ecstatic or repentant – are already part of a religious world our Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophical heroes could not imagine. The philosophy of religion of this unanticipated future, already emergent, needs to learn from New Materialisms, Latourian loopings and intra-active understandings of existence. We can see in them a shooting the moon of proto-fossilized human existence in our paleological present. Szerszynski pushes us to recognize the Anthropocene as postsecular even beyond this, vibrant space-time-mattering assuming forms appropriately understood not just polemically as religious. His work is not really an invitation to philosophers of religion to join the conversation, but the philosophy of religion of the future might yet accept Szerszynski’s challenge to break free from the fantasy fiction of modern secular religion and attend to the formations and revelations emerging around us.

9.5 Love and Extinction: Deborah Bird Rose

Quite different from the mineral flavor of the discussions summarized and sublimed by Szerszynski is the work done on the front lines of anthropogenic climate change and crisis. This brings us back to the earth in the era of the Anthropocene, finding tangles of life which may strike our buffered expectations as “monstrous” in landscapes haunted by the “ghosts” of the Holocene and its futures. (Tsing et al. 2017) These researchers’ sense of the toll which the Anthropocene has already taken on terrestrial life seems far deeper than that of those turning to sedimented pasts or post-organic futures. While new ways of human being may be imaginable in the ruins of fossil-fueled western society, the worlds of many premodern peoples have already been trashed. The worlds of innumerable other species have ended forever. The work of multi-species anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose, rooted in extinction studies, finds in mourning the staggering losses already incurred by the Anthropocene an ethical imperative not only to remember the dead but to join in the dance of the still living.

Working with Aboriginal communities in the Victoria River region of the Northern Territory of Australia, Rose has done pathbreaking work in articulating the interlacing of species, and brought the frank awareness of the symbiotic cycles of life and death in Aboriginal culture into conversation with contemporary, especially postmodern Jewish, thinking. She has thus been able to chronicle the devastation of extinctions across Aboriginal Australian worlds but also to find sources of resiliency and hope. In the recent essay “Shimmer: When all you love is being trashed,” Rose brings together several of her abiding concerns in service of a perhaps surprising optimism. The essay begins with a vertigo-inducing account of “the functional extinctions, the extinction cascades, the extinction vortexes” where “relationships unravel, mutualities falter, dependence becomes a peril rather than a blessing, and whole worlds of knowledge and practice diminish.” (2017, 52) This is an existential vertigo she has elsewhere (2012) described as “double death”.

The essay ends, however, in a section on “saying yes.” (2017, 60) What sustains both mourning and life-affirmation is an understanding of the “shimmering, lively, powerful, interactive worlds that ride the waves of ancestral power” (2017, 53), an “aesthetics” we share with others with whom we share the world.¹¹ “Shimmer” renders the Yolngu category of *bir’yun* – a juxtaposition of textures in visual arts, a calibration of movement and stillness in song and dance which Rose relates to the ethnomusicologists’ synaesthetic category of “iridescence.” (2017, 54) *Bir’yun*’s trajectory from “dullness” to “shimmer” and back makes the ancestors present too.¹² Rose suggests it is a formula not only for engaging ancestral powers in communing with present kin but a blueprint for a kind of scholarly practice which finds ways of “saying yes” to life for the sake of the dead and the dying as much as for ourselves.

¹¹ With Thom van Dooren, Rose proposes a “lively ethnography” in place of ethnography, premised on the fact that humans are not the only players in our shimmering world of interaction who have “ethos.” See Van Dooren and Rose (2016).

¹² See Howard Morphy, “From Dull to Brilliant: The Aesthetics of Spiritual Power among the Yolngu,” *Man*, New Series 24/1 (1989): 21–40, qtd. in Rose (2017), 53.

For Rose, *bir'yun* is an aesthetic in the broader-than-human sense of “lures that both entice one’s attention and offer rewards.” (2017, 53) She invites us to learn this aesthetic from angiosperms, a family of trees who put on grand shows of flowering to attract flying foxes, who fly great distances to respond. “Flowers and flying foxes come together every year with beautiful timing and exquisite generosity, giving each other great kisses that bring forth new generations.” (2017, 58) Humans are linked to these species in the Aboriginal societies around them (Rose was adopted into the flying fox phratry of the Aboriginal community she studied), and can undermine or affirm these synergies. Many settler Australians see flying foxes as pests, and take pleasure in driving them from their homes. Others, however, have become “flying fox carers,” protecting habitat and, more intimately, taking orphans into their homes until they are ready to fly, as “youngsters will die without tactile, vocal, sociofamilial care.” (2017, 57) Such care goes far beyond care for one species: “to celebrate the lives of flying foxes is to say yes to Eucalypts and thus to say yes to dry sclerophyll woodlands and to rainforests. It is to say yes to photosynthesis and to say yes to oxygen.” (2017, 57, 60)

What does the performance of “shimmer” look like in research and reflection about the Anthropocene? Rose was one of the creators of “ecological humanities,” Australian progenitor of the “environmental humanities.” She was a convener of a group who in 2010 gathered on the banks of the Georges River near Sydney and traced a *Manifesto for living in the Anthropocene*. (Gibson et al. 2015) “In the Anthropocene,” they announce, “we are summoned to expand our understandings of ways to conjoin nature and culture, economy and ecology, and natural and social sciences.”

We want to engage in life and the living world in an unconstrained and expansive way. Our thinking needs to be in the service of life—and so does our language. This means giving up preconceptions, and instead listening to the world. This means giving up delusions of mastery and control, and instead seeing the world as uncertain and yet unfolding. So our thinking needs to be—

- Curious;
- Experimental;
- Open;
- Adaptive;
- Imaginative;
- Responsive; and
- Responsible. (Gibson et al. 2015, i–ii)

The “research practices” traced out in this manifesto are worlds away from the “interruptive” use of texts of Scranton’s new humanism. They include walking, contact improvisation, and multi-species listening all in order to “excavate, encounter and extend reparative possibilities for alternative futures” (Gibson et al. 2015, ii–iii).

Environmental humanities in this mode suggests other ways in which the philosophy of religion might contribute to arts of living in the Anthropocene. There was no scholar of religion in the group which gathered on Georges River but there’s nothing stopping us from engaging the alternative ontologies of indigenous human societies, and of kindred species – the poly-disciplinary work Donna Haraway

(2015) calls “making kin in the Anthropocene.” We might from this antipodean project also take a model of how to balance mourning and commitment to life, a balance arguably rarely achieved in Europe, whose landscapes can seem permanently depleted, and in the United States, entranced by the gods of technology and “wilderness.”¹³ The philosophy of religion of the future might be part of a shimmer-inducing dance of scholarly and activist practices, seeking reparative ways of living in the vertiginous Anthropocene present, keeping the dead alive not only in our memory but in our “faith in life’s meaningfulness” (Rose 2017, 61).

9.6 Conclusion: Problems of Evil and Good in the Anthropocene

I’ve urged us to join discussions which haven’t so far felt the need to invite us in. Philosophers of religion are old hands at parsing traditions, many of which plot and try to institutionalize interruption of deadening social pieties. What we study largely precedes the “great derangement” of modern cultural imagination, although we may need to rediscover their appreciation of the porosity of our world. We might learn from indigenous ways of terrestrial being, and from the earth sciences, including their sometimes convergent revelations regarding our always already multi-species nature and destiny. We might even turn to the significance of new Anthropocene formations (some in unexpected places) and turn our attention to the apocalyptic and prophetic worlds of science fiction, crucibles of new religious worlds.

What might this look like in practice? One area of the philosophy of religion where the Anthropocene must surely spell significant change is the problem of evil. Most obviously, the already wobbly distinction between “natural evil” and “moral evil” is likely to wobble further. The quintessential “acts of God” – hurricanes, pandemics, even earthquakes – will increasingly be experienced as not the acts of God alone. Uncanny species-scaled human complicity, original sin-like in its elusiveness, will render the distinction indeterminate. At the same time, as we fail to own and rein in our disruptive practices, the “free will defense” will assume uneasy new forms. This defense of God has never required that human beings know what they are doing; it’s compatible with belief in demonic or other forces commandeering hapless human wills. With new urgency questions about the wisdom of divine design of so unwittingly disruptive a species will force themselves. The “weak God” who suffers with their creation may grow more prominent, too, as it suffers extinction after extinction. And an expanded sense of kinship with the rest of life on our planet (and potentially others) might dramatically affect understandings of suffering and its justification.

¹³ It may be no accident that this manifesto is the work of settler descendants in Australia, who feel (as settler descendant North Americans too rarely do) that the fit between modern “civilization” and nature – the land – was always forced.

As interesting is the likely return of the problem of good – the sense that goodness, happiness and order are not to be taken for granted but raise the profoundest religious questions. The modern problem of evil arises in part because evil is foregrounded as exceptional once a stable natural order comes to be taken for granted as background (Larrimore 2001) – a confidence in order Ghosh has shown to be culpably naive. We're unlikely to return to the way things were before modernity, but the problem of evil is transformed when posed together with a problem of good. Why, when collapse and death seem the default, does the good of life, of virtue, of flying foxes kissing angiosperms, still happen? Perhaps it will come to be seen as part of a cosmic shimmer, part of a pulse of dormant but never dead dullness and life. The good may come to be understood in terms like those of Szerszynski's "Second Axial Age," an emergent miracle with wide-ranging implications for reflections on evil, good, substance and meaning.

How might the unfolding Anthropocene change the reception of canonical texts? Scranton points to the power of ancient texts to relativize the present myopias. Consider the Book of Job, a book which has been read in many ways by many communities of interpreters – not infrequently in the context of reflection on the problem of evil – and always as a critique of present pieties. (Larrimore 2013) The Book of Job has long been a source for Jewish and Christian (and post-religious) thinkers engaging the problem of natural evil. As more episodes of natural evil come with the scent of the human, interpretive emphases may shift. The striking – to some interpretations crucial – disjunction between Job's questions about human experience and the theophany's engagement with all of creation *except* the human will take on a new significance.

The words of Job's friends, long derided for their insincerity and lack of charity, will only jar more for the speciousness of their confidence in moral order. Climate change will make it obvious that the sins of the rich are visited on the poor. But if the friends refuse to acknowledge the destabilized world, God doesn't. The question "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" (38:4) will no longer just challenge the nothingness of a creation like Job; it will be redolent with reproach at this being that wasn't supposed to be a geological agent but has become one. The carefully calibrated world of the wild animals God describes will sound different in the context of anthropogenically accelerated waves of extinctions, too. In questions like "Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? / Do you observe the calving of the deer?" (39:1) God won't be heard as cheering an order God alone knows how to maintain, but as mourning an order human hubris has disrupted. The "dust and ashes" of which Job "repents" (in the inescapable King James translation) will have a new taste, mineral and human.

There are more characters in the Book of Job than humans and God, of course. Most contemporary readers gloss over the accounts of Behemoth and Leviathan, terrifying anarchic energies only God can constrain. As the problem of good reasserts itself, the achievement of such order as we encounter may reconnect us to ways of understanding the world as the precarious result of an ongoing cosmic struggle. Part of Anthropocene experience is a sense that there are more agencies than we know or can commune with. Without a god on our side, our chances of happiness are nil. The God of the divine speeches can seem a lot like Stengers' Gaia, indiffer-

ent to human concerns and at the end of her patience. In the Book of Job readers of the future will be relieved to find her intrusion is still part of a relationship.

What of the Epilogue, regretted by many interpreters in our day for its folkloric simplicity? Stories where everything works out in the end will have become less plausible (no story will end up where it began) but the hope that they might be true in some supernatural way may well be more desperately compelling. That Job's fortunes are restored only when he prays for his friends might come to seem a rallying cry for human solidarity in the face of an increasingly inhospitable world, one in which our best efforts at understanding are upstaged by events. Even what strikes many now as the story's most distasteful element – the replacement of Job's lost children by new ones – may take on a new power and pathos in an age of extinctions, The dead are gone forever, even in stories like Job's. The impossible rebuilding of life in the face of devastating loss might be understood anew in terms of making kin with the rest of life.

Let me end with a friendly amendment to the Book of Job from Deborah Bird Rose.

Job claims a kinship of suffering with the wider Earth, but perhaps there was also a more intimate connection. I imagine that when all Job's animals were killed, his house dogs as well as his herd dogs died. But then, as now, there were stray dogs roaming the streets and back alleys, some of them abandoned, some simply adventurous. What if one of them found Job and settled in beside him, sharing his food and the warmth of his campfire? Being a dog, she would not be fussy about open sores and flaking skin, bad breath or loathsome odors. More than that, she would see him not as a sickly shell but as a full human. Looking into his eyes would she see that in spite of all the rejection by God and by man, there was still the desire for connection that he had kept alive within the loneliness of his grief? (Rose 2011, 77–78).

Responding rightly to the Anthropocene we may need more than our spooked human experience. Forced to look beyond the idols of naïve anthropocentrism and the prophets of inorganic redemption and their religious avatars, philosophers of religion of the future may help surface an emergent sense of our place in the divinely entangled life of the universe.

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Chapter 10

Skills Without Values, Rallies Without Virtues: Beyond Hipster Heideggerianism and Shining Things



David Decosimo

Abstract Hubert Dreyfus’s and Sean Dorrance Kelly’s *All Things Shining* represents one of the most influential articulations of religious naturalism in recent memory and an important vision of the future of philosophy, religion, and their intersection. An extremely popular book that also strives for philosophical seriousness, it proposes a non-supernatural polytheism that celebrates a diverse array of “shining things” as antidote to a nihilism that the authors allege infests contemporary life. We can “lure the gods back” by cultivating skills and opening ourselves to the ecstasy of communal transcendence, a suggestion all the more relevant given the recent rise of global populism. I contend that Dreyfus’s and Kelly’s vision falls short in each dimension of its effort to re-enchant the world: its account of human attunement to value, which attunement they regard as chief among shining things (e.g. an elite basketball pro “playing out of his mind”); its confusion of mere skill or *poiesis* with virtue; and its proposed solution to the ethical dangers inherent in “whooshing up” or *physis* and the lack of critical distance they imagine that such experiences require. I close by suggesting that an Emersonian religious naturalism represents a more intellectually coherent and ethically salutary alternative for “religious nones.”

Keywords Heidegger · Religious naturalism · Virtue · Nihilism · Emerson

Though its luster has somewhat faded, Hubert Dreyfus’s and Sean Kelly’s New York Times bestseller *All Things Shining* (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011), hereafter “ATS”, is surely one of the most popular and broadly influential books of philosophy in recent memory.¹ Straddling the line between academic and pop-philosophy and sparking

¹ While Dreyfus passed away in 2017, Kelly continues to advocate for ATS’s vision in venues like *The New York Time*’s op-ed section. See, e.g., (Kelly 2017b). The two had also planned a follow-up volume (Kelly 2017a).

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conversation in journals and cable talk shows alike, the book stands as a smarter, more humane, and less shrill alternative to “new atheism.” While *ATS* shares the secularist sensibilities of the likes of Daniel Dennett and Sam Harris in its decidedly a- or post-theistic rejection of Western religion and supernaturalism, likenesses end there. For *ATS* is centrally and unapologetically concerned with spirituality, and above all with articulating, defending, and promulgating a sense of transcendence as desirable and even necessary for a happy life. It is an apologia for a species of religious naturalism, a tract for a faith in which Western classics are the sacred texts, serious hobbies and groundbreaking concerts the holy rites, and Dreyfus and Kelly themselves the latter-day prophets.

ATS, then, serves as a window into a certain religious imaginary: that of two non-theist philosophers at two of the world’s most elite universities. The book offers to scholars and citizens a vision of the religiosity they embrace as ethically desirable and intellectually responsible. And, while it is worthwhile simply to examine this religion in its own right, considering what two influential philosophers find spiritually needful and satisfying, in this time of ascendancy for religious “nones” and “the spiritual but not religious,” the book may also afford a glimpse of a form of religiosity that could soon gain traction. They certainly hope it does. But whether those hopes materialize, theirs is nothing if not a vision of the future of religion and, at the same time, a vision of the future of philosophy of religion. At the risk of oversimplifying, theirs is a vision on which religion is more philosophical and philosophy more religious than typical in our time. In what follows, I want to give this vision the scrutiny it deserves.

At the heart of this vision, I argue, are proposals that not only fail to meet the very standards Dreyfus and Kelly set for themselves, but that we have reason to regard as ethically suspect and even dangerous—all the more given the recent global rise of nationalistic populism and authoritarianism. My analysis spills beyond the walls of concern with the particularities of *ATS* and implicates a range of issues of ongoing significance concerning conceptions of virtue, agency, habit, rationality, community, meaning, and individuality.

10.1 Introducing All Things Shining

Dreyfus and Kelly are serious philosophers, and they mean *ATS* seriously. How best to characterize it? Think SparkNotes *Geistgeschichte* meets hipster Heideggerianism. More precisely, *ATS* confronts the despairing nihilism the authors diagnose as dominating the West. Their proposed antidote is a chastened polytheism, a demythologized pantheon of “shining things”: rich, incommensurable values that, if only we cultivate eyes to see them, imbue the world with meaning and make life worth living. We awaken to these gods and their blessings in two primary ways. First, through acquiring skills—such as, woodworking, motorcycle maintenance,

really serious coffee-making—that reveal values importantly independent of our decisions and desires, values that are real in some deep way. Secondly, through being “whooshed up” (their term): lifted out of ourselves, our reflectivity, and our ordinary lives in moments of communal transcendence and irony-defying wonder that raise us into solidarity, self-forgetfulness, and even ecstasy. They have in mind experiences like hearing Martin Luther King Jr. on the Washington Mall, watching Michael Phelps win a gold medal, listening to Jimi Hendrix change what it means to play electric guitar, and so on. Straddling these two prescriptive poles is the task of encountering great stories and ideas in literature, poetry, and art. This dimension, however, is not thematized, theorized, or made explicit, even as *ATS* itself proceeds by unfolding just these sorts of stories, presumably with the hope that the reader will thereby be inducted into the vision the book commends.

The book’s interpretive work, which ranges across works from the *Odyssey* to *Infinite Jest*, has been sharply criticized by many (Gulick 2013; Wills 2011; Mikics 2011; Hart 2011). But *ATS* does not really need to get history or exegesis right in order to accomplish its aims. Rather, questions of accuracy aside, its literary and historical references can be read simply as offering a panoply of diverse cultural moods which seek both to perform the re-enchantment *ATS* commends and to serve as a starter-kit for spiritual home-brewing. That is, they can be read as intended both to wake readers up to shining things and to serve as exemplars for readers to embrace in taking up the sorts of practices Dreyfus and Kelly commend for cultivating spiritual aliveness. A more appropriate and potentially fatal criticism of *ATS*, however, concerns the apparent inadequacy and ethical danger of its proposed solution. Until now, that criticism has yet to develop much beyond Stephen Colbert’s interview zinger, “So, Professor Kelly... coffee and Hitler rallies?” (Colbert 2011). The substance of *ATS*’s proposal, especially its effort to address worries about “whooshing up,” has gone largely unexamined.²

I aim to remedy this, arguing that *ATS* is both inadequate to the nihilism it would defeat and ethically dangerous. I proceed in four basic steps. First, I elucidate the nihilism *ATS* opposes. Then I consider its two-pronged solution to that nihilism, and levy my criticisms. Finally, I close with a brief Thomistic and Emersonian suggestion that seeks to honor some of what is valuable in *ATS*’s vision while gesturing toward a way of avoiding its flaws.

10.2 Nihilism

Consider first the nihilism that Dreyfus and Kelly claim pervades contemporary life in the West. And perhaps the clearest way in is to consider, as they do, what it is *not*, through the case of someone who eludes its grasp, the “Subway Hero” Wesley Autrey who dramatically leapt off a New York City subway platform onto a track to

²But see (Tracy Ann P. Llanera 2012) and (Kyla Ebels-Duggan 2011).

rescue a man who had fallen in front of a train that was arriving in the station. Laying his body over the other man, he saved his life as the train flew over them to a stop. Autrey, they say, felt and acted with “certainty” (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, 7).³ The situation called forth the action, on their telling, “allowing for neither uncertainty or hesitation” (3). It is this last—the absence of dithering, second-guessing, over-analysis, half-heartedness, or double-mindedness—that is especially important to them. Autrey *acted* and he did so in a way that was *immediate*, not only without hesitation, but somehow directly elicited by the very situation.⁴ Indeed, as they have it, he was not a “willful agent” and “he never *decided* to do anything” (8).⁵ All of this, for *ATS*, is the opposite of our condition under nihilism. This is so above all when it comes to the contrast between Autrey and the rest of us in the face of consequential, and especially ethical, decisions.

“In the contemporary world,” they claim, at least for most of us, “we often seem not to have any sense for what the standards of living a good life are in the first place... we seem to have no ground for choosing one course of action over any other” (15). The nihilism that Dreyfus and Kelly allege haunts us concerns our impotence before the most basic sorts of choices about the most important things. More profoundly still, it involves an incapacity even to discern *which* are the most basic choices and *which* the most important things. “Th[is] burden of choice,” they claim, “is a peculiarly modern phenomenon. It proliferates in a world that no longer has any God or gods, nor even any sense of what is sacred and inviolable, to focus our understanding of what we are” (7). In a universe evacuated of the sacred, everything is up for grabs. Since there is nothing in reality itself to guide us in choosing this or that path or way of being, nothing to elicit or evoke, much less command, our desires, we are left with nothing more than the arbitrary exercise of our will: we simply *decide* for or against this or that (40). But such choosing, such boot-strapping our way in the world, finally proves futile and self-undermining, for commitments, relations, and values so chosen are necessarily haunted by the knowledge that nothing other than a contingent, arbitrary act of will set this very course. How, they think we will inevitably find ourselves asking, can a path and life so chosen command our loyalty, let alone any sacrifice, over the long haul or in the face of adversity? Why endure any cost to ourselves or impose any cost on others—as nearly any important project requires—for what not only lacks value in itself but for which there was no reason for our having chosen it?

³ Parenthetical citations throughout refer to *ATS*.

⁴ It seems ambiguous, on their view, whether or in what sense Autrey “counted the cost,” whether he registered that this was a life or death situation, for the victim and him alike. But surely that is an essential ingredient in our estimation of and praise for Autrey: he risked his life for another and without hesitating. Had he not realized a train was coming and judged it a threat to the man’s life he would not have behaved as he did. So there is need for clarification about the sense in which there was no decision—or why *conceptually* but not *ethically* laden perception should count as immediate. I take up this point below.

⁵ Again: “the activity flow[ed] not *from* the agent but *through* him” (11).

This ever-present specter of nihilism which inhabits even our most settled decisions is not merely a crippling absence of clarity about what makes for a good life but deep skepticism about whether such clarity is possible. We must choose how to live and what to love, yet we have “no grounds for [such] choosing, ... no sense of what is sacred to focus our understanding of what we are” or how we should live (7). If we do choose or find ourselves living or caring in some way, we inevitably fear that our doing so is arbitrary and doubt whether there is any real value for our pursuits to track—so they say. The objects of our love, which order and shape our lives, cannot command devotion or elicit wholeheartedness, for we trust neither them nor our pathways to them. “We...seem,” they say, “not to have any sense for what the standards of living a good life are” (15). This burden of choice—our sense that it is up to us how we ought to live and that we lack any trustworthy criteria by which to proceed—amplifies a still more basic fear: that such choices do not finally even matter. That is, we wonder whether our basic questions admit of right or wrong—even better or worse—answers. Even supposing they do, we believe, to reprise Hegel, that death’s finality is the night in which all choices are black.

An age of fragments, the burden of choice, haunting fears that the ground is crumbling beneath our feet, uncertainty that there can be a coherent path forward—all of this is familiar. It echoes Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* (1981) and, more clearly still, Christian theologian Stanley Hauerwas’s *The Peaceable Kingdom* (1983). I doubt Dreyfus and Kelly have even heard of, let alone read, Hauerwas. But his vision, which has exerted tremendous influence in religious studies and in Christian theology, is nearly identical to theirs, only his is nearly three decades older and seems to offer a more precise diagnosis and a more poignant articulation of the alleged ills.

“We experience our world as so morally chaotic,” Hauerwas says, “that we now feel our only alternative is for each person ‘to choose,’ if not create, the standards by which they will live” (Hauerwas 1983, 2). He continues:

Even though we feel strongly about [any number of ethical issues], we are not sure why we feel as we do. And the less sure we are of the reasons for our beliefs, the more dogmatically we hold to them as our only still point in a morally chaotic world. Ironically, our dogmatism only masks our more profound doubt, for although we hold certain moral convictions adamantly, we secretly suspect that we believe what we do because we have been conditioned.... We... are impressed with the knowledge that all beliefs are... at least potentially arbitrary (3).⁶

On this telling, while we tend to throw ourselves into or find ourselves intensely committed to this or that position or view, we are haunted by the sense that we lack good reasons for them. That we hold them, we realize on some level, is an accident of birth, personality, experience, social location, and so on. It is because, in Hauerwas’s somewhat dated parlance, we are “conditioned.” At the same time, a

⁶This portrait somewhat resembles Dreyfus and Kelly’s vision of what they call “the man of self-confidence” (5), one of two sorts of persons they believe deceive themselves about or escape from the burden and impossibility of choice, in this case by headlong, arrogant, unexamined self-confidence. But Hauerwas’s portrait encompasses a broader range of phenomena.

less than fully articulated sense that this is so and the anxiety and insecurity that this generates, lead us to double down on these commitments, to hold them ever more fiercely and tightly. He goes on to note, long before the world of social media or talk of ideological echo chambers, that this works itself out in our surrounding ourselves only with those who agree with us and, we might add, exposing ourselves only to the most caricatured versions of those with whom we disagree. Yet all of this noise, he thinks, is meant to silence an inner sense that, in the end, our convictions and commitments are themselves arbitrary and unjustified. “We choose,” Hauerwas contends, “not only between toothpastes, but between the very ‘plausibility structures’ that give our lives coherence and meaning. Our need to choose even those basic beliefs about why things are as they are and not otherwise, suggests an arbitrariness about them which undermines truthfulness” (7). Hauerwas continues: “The very notion that we are ‘choosing’ or ‘making up’ our morality contains the seeds of its own destruction, for moral authenticity seems to require that morality be not [simply] a matter of one’s own shaping ... *The very idea that we choose what is valuable undermines our confidence in its worth*” (3). What we want and need from the standards by which we would govern our lives and the values that would animate them is precisely a sense that it is good that they should do so, that there is something to commend them to us beyond the mere fact of our having chosen them. We want, in other words, to find that they are not only valued and chosen but *valuable* and *choice-worthy* (even if our very choosing plays some role in their value). This is especially so because of the demands any ethics or life-course make on us and impose on others, for “there is *no* morality that does not require others to suffer for our commitments” (9). Such is Hauerwas’s story.

Such too is the story of *ATS*. Of course, Hauerwas goes on from this diagnosis to prescribe entrance into a Christian way of life. Habituation into this way of life, he says, will alone enable one to recognize it as truthful. But even this truthfulness, he says, will be known by faith, not by sight. It will not provide certainty or unassailable knowledge. Its gift, he says, “is not to relieve us of the ambiguity but to help us understand what it means to live in the world we do—that is, to live truthfully in a world without certainty” (MacIntyre 1983, 16). To say that *ATS* charts a radically different course is, in one sense, to state the obvious. But in another sense it is to hit upon a deeper difference still. For all their quasi-post-modern qualifications, *certainty*, of a particular sort, is just what Dreyfus and Kelly seek and it is the problematic around which so much of their project arises.

To be sure, they are keen to reject any kind of Cartesian foundationalism (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, 19–20). Since it seems to us that “there is no reason to prefer any answer to any other” (21) concerning the shape and character of our lives, our temptation is to look for some sure and certain grounding for our choices (19), but if this was ever possible, it is possible no more. Sure and certain foundations are nowhere to be found, and those that claim to be, precisely by having to *claim* this very status, cannot serve in the way their seekers would hope. Yet, it is precisely Autrey’s “rare... sense of certainty” (3), “the kind of certainty that he felt” (5), that Dreyfus and Kelly exalt as the paradigm of what they offer. The promise of Autrey’s story is precisely the promise of “confidence drawn forth by something outside of

oneself”—rather than the sheer act of will—something “grounded in the way things actually are” (6). That “the way things... are” would call to us, and that some of these realities, those we should most heed, are not only real in their own right, but gleaming, shining, and *certain*—this is the promise and hope *ATS* asks us to wager on.

At least since the appearance of *After Virtue*, tales of lost foundations, ubiquitous uncertainty, and unmet longing for authentic value as markers of modernity have managed to exert deep rhetorical power across a wide-range of contexts. And, while *ATS*’s basic story seems at first blush to exhibit internal coherence, a closer look suggests that things may not be quite as they seem.⁷ So before assessing the book’s antidote to the alleged nihilism that pervades our public life, it is worth interrogating its diagnosis.

Perhaps most obviously, there is the question of who—aside from Dreyfus, Kelly, and their handful of examples, exemplified by David Foster Wallace—experiences such nihilism or holds the views that give it teeth. There is also the question of whether it is as widespread as they claim.⁸ Yet even if we set such questions aside, a still thornier problem remains concerning the portrait’s very coherence. Recall that the central feature of this nihilism is not merely the proliferation of choices about matters of profound import but the lack of criteria for choosing—or at least a lack of good (or any?) reasons commending any one set of criteria over any other. We are at sea with no capacity for navigation, least of all when it comes to matters moral. And yet, at least as it unfolds in *ATS*, this very portrait proves self-undermining.

The book begins with the case of Autrey, the “Subway Hero,” and proceeds in complete confidence that it can simply count on readers to regard Autrey’s feat as *admirable, heroic*—or, at the very least, as *exemplifying something desirable*. Even if readers do not share the still stronger judgment that he is ethically praiseworthy, Dreyfus and Kelly are entirely confident that readers will regard Autrey’s action in relation to the fallen man as at least preferable to alternatives, such as that represented by the complacent onlookers they mention. More than that, they trust that readers will reach such judgments *without even the need for arguments or reasons*—without the need for them to mount any case for regarding Autrey’s action as *preferable*, let alone *heroic*. Instead, they simply rely on readers to assess Autrey in

⁷ See Jeffrey Stout (2004, 122–124) on the opening image of *After Virtue*.

⁸ Certainly many religious believers do not experience such nihilism. For many believers, belonging to and practicing their tradition implicates claims and convictions about the nature of reality and the meaning and content of the good life that are rarely taken as arbitrary expressions of some individual human’s will but, instead, conformity to the character of reality (Schilbrack 2014, esp. 121–28). *ATS* does notice that religious believers continue to exist in the contemporary West, but it is unclear whether it registers that in many cases these traditions are not merely existing but thriving. Nevertheless, the book contends that since contemporary believers typically recognize that at least some non-believers lead decent or even praiseworthy lives these believers are themselves haunted by nihilism after all, for “non-belief is a choice that even a believer must take seriously” (20). It is not very clear how this argument is meant to go. But on any version of it that I can imagine the historical and sociological work necessary for vindication is missing.

the same positive terms that they do. Yet their so proceeding, counting on readers to admire Autrey and to do so without argument, depends on a set of shared values. Consider just a few of the shared values that enable their work to proceed.

Recall that the rescued man was unknown to Autrey and fell in the midst of a seizure. Thus, there are commitments and values here concerning the goodness or even sacredness of innocent human life, the lives of strangers, and more still, the lives of those who suffer from ailments that may render them vulnerable or put them in harm's way. Such life is reckoned of extremely high value, and its value is not degraded by its unfamiliarity or these impairments. In both the grand sweep of history and against the backdrop of some contemporary moral philosophy, such a universal, commitment to human dignity and compassion for the afflicted are hardly uncontroversial. Further, there are values related to the goodness of self-sacrifice or "laying down one's life for another." Autrey not only risked his life and endangered his daughters by leaving them unattended, while he dove in front of a train, but he also risked the their being orphaned and the trauma of seeing their father gruesomely and suddenly killed. Such actions and the values informing them are difficult to square with any strictly utilitarian analysis. They are substantively controversial in relation to history and contemporary moral philosophy alike. Yet it is precisely the reading audience's deep-seated commitment to such values that makes Autrey immediately recognizable as praiseworthy. So widely and deeply held are these values that *ATS* can rely on them in adducing Autrey as an exemplar without even defending or so much as articulating them. Autrey was, after all, almost universally hailed as a "hero" and functions as such throughout the book.⁹

Quite simply, none of this squares with a vision in which everything important is up for grabs and we are not even able to figure out how to go about making important decisions about key values or decisions, or how to have any confidence in them. Instead, the very role Autrey effectively plays in the book itself shows the degree to which we do in fact have deep and shared trust in numerous important values. The value Dreyfus and Kelly most emphasize, to the extent they make any explicit, is something like "compassionate action for the suffering." Thus, at key moments they approvingly cite Autrey, "I just saw someone *who needed help*" (3), and they invoke the "certainty [he] felt *when confronted with a person in distress*" (5). Compassion, care, action for those in need are indeed widely shared values in American society. They are values that move hundreds of thousands to give money and time, sometimes sacrificing their own welfare, to victims of natural disasters and refugees, usually without even a thought that doing so is right, let alone second thoughts. Thus, on a scale in one sense less striking and yet, in another sense, far more striking, Autrey-like compassion and Autrey-like certainty seem altogether commonplace in contemporary America.¹⁰ This is hardly what we would expect if Kelly and Dreyfus's diagnosis of pervasive nihilistic malaise were accurate. "There is," they say, "no doubt that Mr.

⁹The same could be said concerning the various negative exemplars and their function in this initial chapter.

¹⁰And this is to say nothing of global responses to refugees that have unfolded over the past several years. The point is *not* that there has been universal agreement or compassion, but that those who oppose welcoming refugees are no less deeply assured of the rightness of their view and argue for

Autrey's actions are indeed inspiring and heroic" (2). Indeed there is not. And they could hardly begin their book in this way if they expected widespread objections or doubts concerning this claim. The foundational structure of their example and the book's argument depends on the falsity of their claims concerning nihilism.

What would the book need to look like if its portrait of widespread nihilism were in fact accurate? Certainly it could not adduce an allegedly heroic example and expect it to be accepted at face value or without argument. In truth, it is hard to imagine *what* a book, let alone a human community, would look like were it really as deeply confused and adrift as *ATS* claims our world and communities. One is tempted to say that for any society of which *ATS*'s portrait were true, *ATS* or any book would be far too belated to make any difference—or perhaps even any sense—at all.¹¹

Why then do portraits like those painted by MacIntyre, Hauerwas, Dreyfus, and Kelly resonate as they do? Why do they often seem to ring true? Fully answering that question would take us too far afield; but, it is most simply, because there is in fact a great deal of uncertainty about all sorts of important matters and many of us *do* experience this internally. But all of this disagreement and uncertainty, external and internal, is only possible because of a far more widespread background of more or less settled convictions, commitments, and values. It is precisely these deeply imbedded and non-trivial, taken for granted realities that make possible the experience of such uncertainty and doubt. However deep such doubts and uncertainty go, these more settled, subterranean commitments and values go deeper still and prove vitally important and decisive. Moral chaos narrators, however, engage in a certain, perhaps unwitting, sleight of hand wherein our focus is drawn exclusively to the surface, without recognizing what the very possibility of that surface and its happenings presuppose.

No doubt, the condition Dreyfus and Kelly depict is experientially and phenomenologically resonant, but the lessons they draw and the claims they imagine it to authorize are mistaken. The explanation of how their account could be at once wildly inaccurate and so appealing, then, is a variation on points made by Donald Davidson about the dependence of disagreement on agreement and points made by Ludwig Wittgenstein about the dependence of skepticism on knowledge, and of doubt on trust. And one way of addressing what they call nihilism would involve undertaking the kind of therapeutic approach Wittgenstein pursues: not, as they do, trying to *solve* the presenting problem but *dissolving* it.¹² Instead, *solving* the

their approach by appealing to other deeply held values: e.g. security, fairness, cultural and/or national identity, economic concerns, and so on.

¹¹ There is another, more basic assumption which *ATS*'s argumentation presupposes and that further undermines the nihilistic diagnosis. This is its conception of human beings as creatures who, almost universally, *desire*, *seek*, and *value* consistency, coherence, meaning, and a high level of confidence when it comes to their ethical lives. Minimal though this may seem it is neither trivial nor compatible with the degree of radical uncertainty and confusion their portrait conveys.

¹² To *disagree* requires that we have a subject shared in common about which it makes sense to say we have differing perspectives. Once differences reach a certain depth - you say that *fish* fly south for the winter, have beautiful feathers, and go "Quack!" and I hold the standard views about fish - it no longer makes sense to characterize us as disagreeing *about fish*. Why should we think your views in this instance are unorthodox views about fish rather than thinking, more plausibly, that we have mistranslated your language, that by "fish" you in fact mean "ducks." When ostensibly *ethical*

problem is exactly what they try to do, with a twofold prescription: “whooshing up” and acquiring skill.

10.3 Prescription

10.3.1 *Whooshing Up*

Whooshing up is an experience of losing oneself in the excitement, joy, and ecstasy of the collective. Caught up in the moment, one feels fully present, bonded to everyone else, in touch with, even a participant in, something extraordinary—a power, beauty, or truth beyond oneself. Overcome with awe, one is moved as if by an external force: knees straighten, arms rise, head lifts, noises pour forth, strangers are embraced. Think of listening to Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech on the Washington Mall, watching the Beatles debut on the Ed Sullivan Show, completing the final perambulations of the *hajj*, cheering as Lou Gehrig offers his parting words at Yankee Stadium, witnessing the unveiling of a newly-discovered Rembrandt masterpiece, celebrating VJ day in Times Square, or listening, as a young and hopeful German, to a beer hall speech given by Hitler. My examples are decidedly diverse, phenomenologically and ethically, yet they are here lumped indiscriminately together because this is exactly how the book proceeds with and conceives “whooshing up.” For the sake of argument, I will simply overlook the book’s dubious and unargued claim that “there is no essential difference in how it feels to rise as one in joy to...praise the Lord, or to rise as one in joy to...praises of the Hail Mary pass” (193), as well as its tendency to collapse the extraordinarily diverse array of experiences that might be variously be called transcendent, religious, sacred, or ecstatic into some generic and vague commonality.¹³ They do, at least, acknowledge the *ethical* diversity encompassed by various instances of whooshing up. I will return to that issue shortly.

difference gets extreme enough, we have to ask whether in fact it is *ethics* or *values* that are being talked about and disagreed upon. We have to ask, in other words, what reason we have to see someone as even talking about ethics or values *at all*. In contrast, genuine ethical disagreement presupposes a sufficient degree and background of common ground in relation to which we have reason to characterize someone as having a view *on ethics* with which we disagree. To count as debating the justice of abortion, say, requires that we have quite a lot of *agreement* about what justice is and requires. For development of these points, see Stout (1988), chapters 1, 2, and 9, especially p. 19–20 (from which I draw the structure of the fish/ducks example) and 36–45.

¹³ Here scholars of religion especially – and I expect many religious people – will find their particularly unpersuasive. Religion scholars will worry about essentialist or perennialist ideas of religious experience as common across all traditions and about neglect of the role particular concepts and commitments, play in experience. On these points see, Stephen Bush (2014). Many religious folks will, fairly or not, suspect that such a sentence could only have been written by someone who has never actually been part of a community rising as one to praise the Lord—or, maybe not even a group of fans rising to celebrate a game-winning pass.

"There are moments," they say, "during which something so overpowering happens that it wells up before you as a palpable presence and carries you along.... That is the moment when the sacred shines... the moment [that] gives meaning to life" (194, 199). Filling us with "ecstatic and spontaneous joy" (197), such experiences allow for "no question of ironic distance" (194) and confront us with what is most real and true in the world (200). They describe this experience variously: "Out of control... overtaken by some potent force" (202) that "carries you along as on a powerful wave" (194); "Taken over by the situation..., I am no longer the source of my activity" but ruled and overtaken by "the madness of the crowd" (203). One senses why they see whooshing up as combating nihilism. For, in such moments, indecision and irony, doubt and worry, indifference and despair dissipate. Awe, wonder, joy, and even ecstasy press in. One is wholly present, fully alive. And one experiences a meaning that seems to belong to the nature of things, a value real enough to command. Whooshing up is both an occasion of meaning and, in retrospect, a revelation that there *is* meaning, that the sacred *is*. Deeply informed by Heidegger but scarcely mentioning him—certainly not here, for obvious and troubling reasons—they call whooshing up *physis*. These synonyms name "the shining moments of reality" (200).

One essential and central dimension of *physis* is precisely a loss or surrender of control of oneself and one's actions. Dreyfus and Kelly speak of being "overtaken by some potent force," "hav[ing] one's actions no longer completely under one's control," (202) "not [acting] voluntarily," "no longer [being] the source of my own activity" (203). *Physis* is something one *undergoes* as opposed to something one *effects* or even chooses. One is moved rather than a mover, a patient not an agent. Something outside captures and animates a person. In a vital sense, that is the *point* of *physis*, why and how it answers nihilism. For in this way it not only overcomes but bypasses all indecision, questioning, or second-guessing, and puts a person in contact with what shines, rendering her subject to it. Yet to experience or be open to experiencing *physis* requires, they claim, a surrender of self to it: one must set aside rational assessment, ethical evaluation, critical questioning, and the like. You must not and cannot "decide as a rational individual what the appropriate response to the situation should be" but let the experience have its way with you. The point bears repeating: for Dreyfus and Kelly, *physis* requires the temporary refusal and suppression of critical assessment, distance, or inquiry. One cannot whoosh up if one is busy counting the ethical cost. This is not merely because they believe the very *moment* of whooshing up excludes that; but because, on their telling, the nature of *physis* requires that moral evaluation and critical judgment cease *in advance* of the moment of transcendence. Like riding a roller coaster, one must board not merely before the wheels turn but before the safety bar descends, locking one in place. They take this point to be not only essential but obvious: How could ethical evaluation or rational assessment possibly comport with authentic openness to, let alone contact with, the wild, shining things? Indeed, they explicitly contrast *physis* and the openness it demands with ideals of independence of mind, autonomy, and judgment. These, they assume, cannot possibly be compatible with whooshing up. They offer no arguments for this view. Nor do they explain what their rationale is for

embracing it, but it seems to be rooted in an assumption that all ethical assessment and rational critique require a certain kind of deliberation and detachment, a sort of calculative assessment and at-one-remove-ness, that is at odds with the immediacy and presence, the in-the-moment-ness, that *physis* seems to require.

Given all this, they are well aware of the peril *physis* poses. It is, they confess, “inherently dangerous, perhaps even repellent” (202). Its “potential cost” can seem “prohibitive” (205). It is obvious why. “Whooshing up...is...Janus-face,” and risks “leav[ing] us open to fascist rhetoricians” (205). “There is,” they rightly concede, “a vanishingly small distance between rising as one...at a baseball game and...at a Hitler rally” (203). If they would commend *physis*, they admit that they are duty bound to articulate some way to guard us from “Hitler’s taking over” (204). This threat is no exaggeration or idle worry. Some of history’s worst horrors have been perpetrated in states of *physis*, or goaded, fueled, and deepened by them. Moreover, *physis* often serves as the seductive entrance into some such community, ideology, practice, or form of life. It can both baptize someone into such things and keep that person coming back, while transforming them profoundly in the process.

Consider Alfons Heck’s remarks about hearing Hitler as a boy:

[As we waited,] the tension...tingled into our fingertips. We stood...facing the twin grandstands with their enormous granite swastikas.... We froze to quivering attention, but the first man who stepped into view...was [merely introducing Hitler]. I don’t remember anything of what he said.... When Hitler finally appeared we greeted him with a thundering, triple ‘Sieg Heil,’ and it took all our discipline to end it there.... We never had a chance. I am sure none of us...took our eyes off him.... Then his voice rose, took on power and became rasping with a strangely appealing intensity. It touched us physically because all its emotions were reflected on our faces. *We simply became an instrument in the hands of an unsurpassed master...* He roared out a promise and an *irresistible enticement*.... “You, my youth...are destined to be the leaders of a glorious new order under the supremacy of National Socialism!”... We erupted into a frenzy...that bordered on hysteria. For minutes on end, we shouted at the top of our lungs, with tears streaming down our faces: *Sieg Heil!* From that moment on, I belonged to Adolf Hitler body and soul.”¹⁴

For Heck and thousands others the experience of whooshing up into the ecstatic delirium of Hitler’s Nazi rhetoric defined the entire course of his life—and the lives of all those who fell victim to its genocidal regime. The defining characteristics of *physis* are all here, to an almost uncanny degree: tingling energy, almost involuntary physical responses, frenzy, tears, hysteria, surrender to some external power that makes people its instrument. Heck describes another rally some 6 years later and its consequences. Far into the war, with Germany having sustained major losses, Goebbels spoke:

‘Do you accept total war, people of Germany, or annihilation by the hands of the Soviet-Jewish beast?’ He shouted in a refrain repeated a dozen times. ‘We want total war’ roared the crowd.... From then on, anything not essential to the war effort was

¹⁴ Heck, (1985), 21–23, my emphasis.

sharply curtailed.... Eventually, over four million foreigners were sent to do slave labor in our factories.¹⁵

The grave danger of *physis* is not merely its refusal of critical distance but the fact that one delivers one's agency into the hands of a power that can birth and sustain horrors. Heck's case suggests the very real consequences. For Dreyfus and Kelly, however, the risk of *physis* is actually "part of what gives its meaning such force" (242n.13). "You cannot," they say, "have gods that care about you without having gods that sometimes get angry as well" (198).¹⁶ That *physis* flirts with and brings one in proximity – and sometimes even service to – horrors is part of what constitutes it as an effective antidote to nihilism.

To their credit, they frankly concede that their whole project disintegrates if they cannot establish a safeguard against wicked *physis* and its power: "Everything we have said so far is in vain if we can't avoid [this] danger" (206). Surely, they are right. Unchecked *physis* is a cure far worse than the disease—even were that disease something more than the hypochondriatic fantasy we have reason to worry it may be. Yet, despite their efforts, such a troubling cure is just what they offer. Their approach to *physis* is not only underdeveloped but unsuccessful and ethically dangerous.

10.4 Skill as a Revealer of Value

Dreyfus and Kelly attempt to address the danger of *physis* with what they call *poi-esis* or skill. Actually, skill does double duty in their framework: it is both a step toward managing *physis* and it constitutes the other independent prong in their response to the challenge of nihilism. Their efforts, I will argue, fall short on both fronts. We consider skill first in its capacity as answer to nihilism.

Anyone familiar with Alasdair MacIntyre's notion of practice in *After Virtue* can readily grasp the notion of skill at play in *ATS*. A practice, on MacIntyre's account, is a complex and robust domain of human activity, with internal standards of excellence, that produce various goods the full recognition and appreciation of which requires participation in or facility with that very practice.¹⁷ In MacIntyre's sense, activities as various as woodworking, baking, mathematics, bridge, fly fishing, and ballet are all practices. Each of these is marked by internal standards of excellence in the sense that sufficiently adept practitioners can distinguish between objectively better and worse performances, often achieving a high degree of agreement with

¹⁵ (1985), 88.

¹⁶ Such remarks suggest that danger or its threat is in some way essential to whooshing up, a constitutive feature of the experience. But other comments complicate the picture. It is uncertain which constitutes their settled view. Regardless, what remarks like these capture is their view that *risk* is inherent and inevitable when it comes to *physis*.

¹⁷ This paraphrases MacIntyre, see, e.g., (1981), 187–191. Oddly, *ATS* does not engage with or even mention MacIntyre's work. Additionally, unlike MacIntyre, *ATS* does not consider the role authority and apprenticeship play in acquiring skill, instead regarding trial and error as sufficient.

fellow practitioners. In professional sports, for instance, experts often agree about who the better or best players are and can often roughly predict the order in which new players will be drafted. For the practitioner of each of these, there are goods – a well-played game of bridge, a perfect croissant, and a beautiful fly-fishing cast or pirouette – that can be realized only through the practice, itself. And fully to appreciate, and recognize these goods requires facility with the practice ¹⁸.

Skill, then, is mastery of or, more conservatively, facility with some practice. More than purely “physical ability,” skills enable one to “see the world differently,” to perceive what things mean and how they matter in the domain to which the skill pertains (207). For instance, where the rest of us see only so much flour or butter, the highly skilled baker can recognize the quality of this flour or butter over that, the real distinctions of value “out there” in the world, independent of mere opinion or subjectivity. “The task of the [skilled person],” they explain, is “to *cultivate* in himself the skill for *discerning* the meanings that are already there” (209). Moreover, rather than being primarily rote or repetitive, skill involves dynamic responsiveness to the particularity and uniqueness of any given situation: what *this* piece of wood, yarn, music, or bridge hand requires (209). As they have it, skill also breeds a kind of reverence or appreciation for what the skill concerns and for matters somehow connected with it. Thus, the woodworker values not only the wood, they say, but the land and place from whence it comes and in which she finds herself (210). They offer no argument for or defense of this claim that skill breeds reverence or love for the matter of the skill, the various material realities and contexts it implicates, but simply posit it based on the testimony of a single craftsman (208-10). Not only do we have good reason to doubt this claim, it signals a far deeper problem with *ATS*’s proposed solution.

It is often that case that mastery of a skill coincides with love for that skill or its object, but this is not always the case. More importantly, there is no logical or essential connection between mastery and love. It is one thing to be excellent at something, to master some skill. It is another to love or value that skill ¹⁹. I have argued this point elsewhere, but consider, briefly, “burnout”.²⁰ While some may “burn out” of a given practice because of matters extraneous to a skill, some people may burn

¹⁸ Of course, a non-baker can appreciate the deliciousness of a well-made croissant, for instance. But at the highest levels, participation in and facility with the practice is typically necessary for drawing and understanding the very finest distinctions of excellence.

¹⁹ These latter two—love of the skill vs. love of the values disclosed by the skill—are themselves also distinct. That is, we can distinguish a love for the skill of beer brewing from love or valuing (in a more than merely instrumental way) the distinctions and gradations of value disclosed by the skill (e.g. different varieties of hops). To take another example, supposing that excellent skiing involves recognizing distinctions in snow that the rest of us miss, it is one thing to love skiing, another to love those different varieties of snow. Of course, one must attend to or notice these distinctions to be excellent at the skill, but that is a different matter than finding them interesting, meaningful, or lovely. Someone might want to insist that one only count as loving the skill if one also love or care about the values disclosed by it. Supposing that represents something more than a nominal or stipulative claim, I am not certain whether it could be defended. For our purposes, we can set these distinctions aside.

²⁰ Decosimo (2014).

out precisely because they are bored with, indifferent to, sick of, or even come to hate the skill and practice. They may feel that they have *exhausted* the value belonging to its domain, discovered its value to be trivial or worthless, or feel regret or shame at having so invested themselves.

Regardless, the basic point is that it is one thing to have expert know-how in some domain, and quite another to value or prize that skill or the values and distinctions relevant to that domain. It is one question whether a woodworker recognizes what some piece of wood requires and the distinctions within it; another whether she *cares* about, let alone *values* or *loves*, any of this—wood, distinctions, or woodworking. Certainly, love for a skill and the values it discloses may coincide with facility with it, but, there is no necessary relation. Now, if all this holds for values *directly* implicated in some skill, then love for what is only *tangentially* or *more remotely* connected to it—land, forests, and conservation, say, for woodworkers—has less relation still. Skill does present its possessor with relatively objective distinctions in value that are otherwise invisible, but it does not decide the question of whether one will actually value those values or care about those objects or that skill. This brings us to the more fundamental problem.

Attentive care with some domain may awaken one to distinctions of value therein, values that are about more than mere interests, “distinctions of worth that [are] already there...out in the world” (209). *But skill does not combat Dreyfus’s and Kelly’s brand of nihilism.* That brand of nihilism can happily concede that distinctions in value emerge in skill’s light but it doubts their very value. That is, it questions why or whether the skills *themselves* matter, whether skills themselves have any value, let alone whatever we encounter through them. It doubts, in other words, whether these values are themselves of any real worth. Notice that for the “objective” or “real” distinctions that become apparent through skill to be valuable and meaningful in the salient respect the skill *itself* must be valuable and meaningful. The value of these distinctions or what they pick out is itself parasitic on the skill’s value. But the value of any one skill over any other, let alone the value of any skill at all, is just what the nihilist denies or cannot see. The very problem is that, at the most basic level—where one would choose among life courses and skills—the value of any and everything is in question. So, even if we grant that there are objective difference in “value” between this wood or that *for woodworking* or this player or that *in baseball* or the elegance of this or that proof *in mathematics*, what the nihilist doubts is the value of woodworking, baseball, mathematics – and, more profoundly, the value of life itself.

Distinctions that are disclosed by some skill may be “objective,” but for them to be imbued with meaning for some person in a nihilism-defeating way requires that the skill *itself* be meaningful, choice-worthy, and valuable in a sense no less objective or desire-independent than the distinctions. Like the distinctions it discloses, it must be valuable not merely because someone has simply chosen to value it. Dreyfus’s and Kelly’s nihilist doubts that any skill is better than any other, that any has value apart from our simply choosing to value it, and that there is any non-arbitrary way to decide which skills to love or care about or whether to love or care about any at all. Of craft and junk coffee, good and bad wood, and so on, the nihilist asks what does it matter? These are questions that *ATS*’s appeal to skill is ill-equipped to answer.

10.5 Skill as Safeguard for Physis

In addition to constituting a stand-alone weapon against nihilism, Dreyfus and Kelly adduce skill as the sole and sufficient safeguard against the perils of whooshing up. In relation to *physis*, skill becomes “*metapoiesis*,” a capacity for avoiding pernicious *physis*, “for responding to meaningful distinctions between dangerous and benign ways of [whooshing up]” (211).²¹ Here, though, their prescription is even less successful.

Recall that philosophers like Aristotle, Aquinas, and their heirs distinguish sharply between skills and moral virtues. Virtue, Aristotle famously says and Aquinas is fond of quoting, makes a person and her work good. Virtue makes someone an excellent *person*. It makes someone good in an unqualified sense, good simply speaking. Skill makes one a good butcher, baker, or coffee-maker. Virtue not only gives one a capacity for producing something somehow good—crafting a beautiful table, a perfect lager, or an elegant proof—it actually (a) *inclines* one to do (b) what is good and right, that is, it inclines one to do *ethically* or *humanly* speaking, rather than technically or according to the strictures of some practice. Skill, in contrast, does nothing in itself to incline one to put it to use, let alone to put it to use exclusively for good ends.

We already glimpsed the first dimension of this point in noticing the difference between capacity and inclination, skill and love. It is one thing to be able to do something (well), it is another thing to *love* something, to want to and be inclined to do it. Skill answers only to the first of these: mere capacity or aptness, not inclination or desire. Virtue, in contrast, is not merely a *capacity* or *facility* for something but a stable *desire* or *love* for it. By virtue one is not merely *able* to do something but *inclined* to do it. This is so for this tradition because it is a determination, a habituation, of love, which itself implicates knowledge and desire alike. Yet more than forming inclination in any old way, it is a particular determination of that love: an inclination to do and seek what is actually choice-worthy or good in human life. Because of it one is not merely able to recognize and do what is good or just, but one has a stable *desire* and *love* for so doing. It is that by which one is inclined to do well as a human being, however open-ended and various that might be. And this includes its own good use and the exclusively good use of every other skill one has.

Nothing proper to the skill of woodworking determines whether one will use it for evil or for good. It fails even to incline to its own use, much less its own *good* use. The same *skill* memorializes the oppressed and crafts a cross for burning. While the excellent woodworker may or may not love woodworking, let alone justice, the just person necessarily loves justice. She does so precisely by being possessed of the virtue of justice. Likewise, whether someone accords woodworking a place in life conducive to flourishing or pursues it to the neglect and destruction of friendship and family is, again, beyond the purview of the skill itself. It is *virtue* that enables

²¹ Actually, they characterize *metapoiesis* variously as that and, more broadly, as a skill for “getting in balance our receptivity to *physis*, *poiesis*” (243).

one to choose wisely about skill, its place in some life, and the ends it serves. In contrast, one and the same *skill* sculpts a swastika or a *pieta*. While *ATS* may concede this point to some degree, at least by acknowledging Hitler's sway over many skilled craftspeople (211), it does not begin to take its full measure. Virtue is a shaping of love and practical reason so that one's agency takes a particular good form and so that one accords skills a good place in life and in service of good ends.

Moreover, where skill concerns the production of external goods (including performances), virtue concerns the production of conduct, human action and agency itself. We can look at any given production in at least two ways: as a piece of workmanship, product or display of skill, on the one hand, and, on the other, as a display of character, human agency, ends, and love. We evaluate a piece of workmanship and the skill behind it simply by the standards proper to the practice it belongs to, as a good or bad painting, dance, proof, or whatever. But it is always fair to ask as well about the ends sought and loves displayed in the production, about why, in the fullest perspective, a practitioner produces what she or he did, the reasons for the production.²² It is always fair, in other words, to inquire after and evaluate it not as a good or bad piece of workmanship but good or bad piece of conduct. That is, in terms of its place in some life and as exhibiting an agent's character and intentions, in terms of love for some ends and thus as making manifest a way of life and vision of human being.

Notice too that while any skill *can* be used for evil, some skills seem *exclusively* evil: pimping, extorting, murdering, torturing, human trafficking, lynching. Complexities lurk here, for these can seem to straddle the domains of practice and conduct, skill and vice—virtue's opposite. For Dreyfus and Kelly, however, there is no consideration of such issues or distinctions: these are skills simply. Yet such troubling skills are no less pervasive in human affairs than their banal counterparts. But the sole criterion they offer for assessing any skill or domain is whether it “appropriately elicits further...meaningful involvement.” “There are,” they continue, “no objective rules [here], [so] one must be open to the possibility that the domain...one [enters] will reveal itself as too brutal or isolating... One must be prepared... to regret having [entered] such a world” (219).²³ Yet, as history and experience attest, even the most disturbing skills *can* sustain “meaningful” involvement and community, all too easily. “No objective rules,” we might ask? Once we refuse any and all “objective rules” or standards, any determinate norms of justice, is not brutality itself merely in the eye of the beholder? For Dreyfus and Kelly,

²² It may be that they did it “for its own sake” but that will not suffice to tell us whether they did ill or well in so doing. For one thing, we will need to get clearer one what on just what exactly this means for them and, along those lines, the place in their life of such doing in general and of this *particular* doing. That is, this piece of conduct necessarily finds itself unfolding in certain circumstances and as embedded in a whole life in which it has some place, and likely some relation to other ends the person regards as worthwhile in their own right.

²³ They rightly notice—though this is never reconciled or coordinated with their early and framing claims about pervasive and dominant nihilism—that human beings do, by and large, find themselves already caring for and about a whole range of goods (215–18). But their sole tool or suggestion for evaluating the worthiness and value of these goods is the consideration noted above.

nothing can be ruled out, either in advance or at all. “You just have to try it out,” they say, “and see” (219).

Deeper problems still plague their prescribed pedagogy of trial and error, experience, regret, and embrace. For Dreyfus and Kelly, acquiring and evaluating some skill is solely a matter of experimentation. Now, if the only candidates for consideration were things like coffee making, quilt weaving, or fly tying, such a pedagogy risks little. But, especially if we begin with our desires as they recommend, what we feel drawn to, excited by, or fascinated with, why think the options will be so exclusively benign, the stakes so low? Little in history or honest introspection would suggest that. The very fact that they think a skill might show itself too brutal indicates the real possibility of evil pursuits and vicious skills among those they imagine us flirting with and potentially embracing. Commending trial and error when horrors are in the offing and when those who stand to pay the highest price are not only participants but their victims seems more like courting wickedness than incurring reasonable risk. Some skills tend to grab hold of us—and not easily let go. Even if we do discover these too brutal and even if we *once* were capable of reaching that assessment, it may be too late: in terms of what we have done and are now unable to do or to undo. For that matter, why would we think that someone grown skilled in brutality, domination, and all they offer ego, desire, and the darker dimensions of the self will actually *recognize* some skill as misguided, brutal? Even if, at the outset, someone enters a possibly pernicious skill with trepidation or hesitation, the further one inhabits and masters it, the less likely that he or she would be positioned or equipped to recognize it as vicious.

These problems increase exponentially when it comes to what they call *metapoiesis*. This is unsurprising, for Dreyfus and Kelly model *metapoiesis* after skill in nearly every way, including in their vision for its acquisition and in their neglect of any normative criteria. *Metapoiesis*, they announce, is a skill for judging between benign and brutal forms of *physis*. But when it comes to elucidating this and to explaining how it would enable *ethical* judgment, *ATS*, in its four pages, says respectively very little and nothing at all.

A skill that did enable such judgments would be a virtue. Its object would be neither coffee nor *physis* but that which was judged authentically good, here and now. It would alert us to and dispose us toward what was choice-worthy and valuable in human life, and disincline us from evil, whether in confronting the intensity of *physis*, engagement with various skills, or the ordinary stuff of life. As such, in constitution and acquisition, it would be fundamentally unlike mere skill. Yet, even as Dreyfus and Kelly want—and need—*metapoiesis* to do all this in order to meet the challenge and promise of *physis*, this is not what they envision or provide. They offer no account of why or how simply experimenting with *physis* could produce any sort of *ethical* habit, a sort of “skill” qualitatively unlike any other they envision.

Here is their fullest explanation of *metapoiesis* and its acquisition:

A new kind of courage is required for this path [of engaging *physis* in pursuit of *metapoiesis*]. In place of...courage to resist the madness of crowds, we need the courage to leap in and experience it. Sometimes...things will turn out well. Sometimes, by contrast, one dances with the devil... One can only survive [the]

fiery darkness [of *physis*] if one learns by experience the dangerous world it reveals... Only by having been taken over by the fanatical leader's totalizing rhetoric and experiencing the dangerous and devastating consequences it has, does one learn to discriminate between leaders worth following and those upon whom one must turn one's back (220).

Metapoiesis, they claim, is learned only by falling prey to brutal *physis*, suffering and effecting devastation, and this, in some entirely unexplained way, leads to wisdom. In claiming it is "only" by surrendering oneself to evil or the evil leader that one can learn to discriminate between good and destructive, just and unjust forms of *physis* and corresponding ways of life, they make experiences like Heck's prerequisite to ethical growth. Complicity in horrendous evil becomes a necessary step in the path beyond that evil. There is no explanation about how or why this should be the case. But suppose we set this "only" aside. This does little to help. If one cannot *already* distinguish good from evil *physis*, how would simply having some experience teach one whether the very *physis* in question was good or bad?

Suppose a young man accepts an invitation to a Klan rally. The speeches resonate with him and his nascent view of things. Swept up in the experience, he feels deeply connected to others and experiences a new sense of purpose and meaning. He leaves a fledgling adherent to racist ideology. What about any of this is supposed to enable him to recognize such *physis* as pernicious? It is not merely the case that there is no good answer to this question but that there is no way of varying or manipulating such an experience that *in itself* could make some particular formative outcome more or less likely. The point, in other words, pertains not to one or another example but to *physis* or experience itself. When it comes to their ethical effects and consequences for some agent, such experiences are, in themselves, altogether underdetermined. Almost everything hangs on the commitments and values someone brings to the experience. Unless someone is *already* ethically well-formed (in which case we have to ask why he would be at a Klan rally in the first place), how will he be better positioned to pronounce on the goodness or badness of this *physis* after the experience than before? Feelings or experience of ecstasy and transcendence do nothing in themselves to equip one to judge well about them or assess whether their context or cause or the ends in relation to which they are experienced are in fact good.

If mastery of some skill cannot give birth to practical wisdom or orient one toward justice, far less can ecstatic experience. Indeed, if anything, it would seem this person would be *less* well-positioned to rightly evaluate such *physis* after tasting its fruit than before.²⁴ For, even if we suppose that being swept up in Hitler's rallies occasionally left *some* judging Hitler evil, for Heck and countless others such experiences birthed, fueled, or reinforced their cruel devotion.²⁵ And someone

²⁴This seems especially so given *ATS*'s apparent denial of any phenomenological difference between various experiences of *physis*. If such experiences are basically the same, what is there to judge or decide about among them? I leave this point aside in proceeding, so as to address the strongest version of Dreyfus and Kelly's vision.

²⁵And for those who did reach this negative verdict, would not this typically be in virtue of something in the experience running afoul of some values, convictions, or commitments they *already* had? In other words, would not it typically be the case that their *character* would figure at least as centrally as the experience itself?

whooshed into such horrors seems relatively less likely to recognize them *as horrors*, for, other things being equal, it seems that *physis* would tend to orient one positively toward the experience, wanting more. Further, even if we imagined that somehow exposure to *lots* of *physis* occasionally did yield ethical wisdom, the risk of complicity in horrors or even permanent captivity to them seems an exorbitant price to pay for escape from *my* nihilism, especially because the heaviest cost will in all likelihood be borne by someone else.

10.6 Emerson, Aquinas, and Virtue

Dreyfus and Kelly are surely right about needing something that does what they imagine *metapoiesis* to do. But they do not even begin to provide it, nor can they. Ralph Waldo Emerson, I believe, can begin to point a way forward. He can also alert us to—and resolve—another danger of *physis*, that of *physis* gone *right*: the *physis* arising in relation to a good cause, like the *physis* of a peace rally. I build on an oft-misread line: “great is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude” (Emerson 1983, 263). And, doubly Emersonian, I aim less for historical than rational reconstruction, making Aquinas my partner in the effort.

Recall that Dreyfus and Kelly assume that inviting and experiencing *physis* precludes ethical evaluation and vice-versa. And this is thanks to their assumptions and ideas about either or both:

1. the immediacy *physis* seems to require
and/or
2. the non- or anti-rational character of the passions that *physis* engages or the experience it elicits or constitutes.

Neither of these seems to leave room for rational or ethical consideration. But there is no need to accept their assumptions or the conclusions they draw from them.

First, suppose *physis* does require immediacy—that it does not allow for detached analysis or deliberation. Even so this does not necessarily mean that it cannot allow for or engage reason or ethical discernment. When it comes to speculative and practical reasoning, thought and action, the non-inferential or non-deliberative is not the same as the non-rational or non-ethical. We deploy concepts all the time, including ethically laden concepts, and we act in ethically expressive and attuned ways *without* engaging in explicit deliberation, reflection, or evaluation. Understanding and imagining this is just what Emersonian, Aristotelian, and Thomistic conceptions of habit enable.

Recall Emerson’s claim: “great is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude” (263). For Emerson, conformity is death and “whooshing up” even into some truly good cause can represent conformity’s most toxic triumph. Where bad *physis* and its worst dangers are relatively easily identified and rejected, at least for the ethically well-formed, the dangers of

“good” *physis* are more difficult to detect and the more insidious for it. “Good” *physis* risks wedding the crowd’s negation of individuality with mindless embrace of do-goodery’s manufactured self. The cause’s very nobility elicits ever-deeper devotion and captivity to *physis*. And because the cause is good—this or that issue of justice, say—it becomes easy to abandon the vocation of selfhood and individuality, to surrender agency and responsibility in conformity to the crowd. Think of the monotony, redundancy, and virtue-signaling of “woke” Twitter hordes. There is the blind, destructive power of indignant rage that can easily neglect justice in the way it pursues its goal or take as its target the innocent. This Emerson despises. But he is equally disgusted and troubled by the erasure of thought, the adoption and performance of a manufactured, ready-made self, someone whose judgments are prescribed by pundits and celebrities and whose sentences could have been produced by a bot. Notwithstanding the risk and well aware of the powers of good causes, ego, and *physis* to “cover”—in all the wrong senses—a multitude of sin, Emerson would have us abandon neither crowds nor causes. Rather, through virtue, he would have us find a way to preserve our independence and self-reliance, even in whooshing up.

“Men,” he says, “imagine that they communicate their virtue or vice only by overt actions, and do not see that virtue or vice emit a breath every moment” (266). Emerson is saying that, as Dreyfus and Kelly do, we typically tend to imagine ethical life as unfolding primarily or even exclusively in “overt” terms: considered actions, explicit deliberation, and the like. But, on his view, this captures at best only one half of the picture: the necessity and importance of reasoning and deliberating. Without neglecting that, Emerson wants to insist that in “emit[ing] a breath every moment,” virtue and vice are at work all the time. They suffuse our very agency and being in the world. Just so, they are not exclusively or even primarily a matter of explicit analysis or deliberation. On this view, consonant with the Thomistic and Aristotelian perspectives sketched above, virtue and other habits enable action and feeling that bear reason’s stamp and reflect its judgment yet *also* come with nature’s ease and immediacy. That is what it means for them to be *habits*, a second-nature. Habits “emit a breath every moment” when we fluently read a word or speak a language (intellectual skills), automatically render the cashier his due in money and respect, or grow angry at witnessing an act of bigotry (acts of justice).²⁶

Consider this last case and let us say Lucy is outraged upon witnessing a man yell a racial slur at a person of color. She is outraged, filled with indignation and, almost automatically, steps in with forceful words of rebuke to the man and acts of appropriate solidarity and comfort in relation to the victim. It is because of Lucy’s deep-seated and standing commitments and values and a life of living them out in conduct repeatedly that she acts as she does. An earlier, less courageous or wise Lucy would have had to think matters through and might not have handled them as well. A continent but not virtuous Lucy would have spoken the right words and done

²⁶The same can be said for *vicious* acts as well, for instance immediately recoiling in disgust upon witnessing an act of interracial intimacy.

the right things but not with the appropriate feelings of anger that this one does. A still less virtuous Lucy might have done nothing at all. And a vicious, racist Lucy might join in with glee and feelings of pride. As it stands, Lucy's immediate, non-inferential anger at injustice—any such anger *at injustice*—is not a-conceptual, let alone non-rational. Rather, the passions themselves bear habit and are imbued with and embody standing judgments about rightness and goodness. And not just passions but the very source of agency – will and practical reason, we might call them – is no less capable of bearing such habits.

When this center of agency is so habituated, as it is for Lucy, virtues and vices enable and elicit not only right *feeling* but just or unjust *action* in the same rational but non-inferential, non-deliberative way. When we offer the cashier his due in respect and cash, give the member of some racial minority the very same due consideration, attention, and respect in all our interactions as we give some white person, or, respond well (or not) to an act of bigotry and do any of this without deliberation, analysis, or second thought and with appropriate feelings, we manifest the presence of our habits and, more profoundly, our character. Such actions reflect more or less settled and explicit ethical commitments, our judgments about justice and injustice. This is why the person who rebukes the racist without a second thought is praiseworthy *at all*. She would not be praiseworthy if she only accidentally said the right thing, produced these sounds as the consequence of a fit, or, under questioning, could give no good reason at all as to why she so acted or could not in any way explain what was going on, what she did or was responding to.²⁷ In those cases, the lack of connection between action, agency, and any morally commendable conviction or judgment, leads us to doubt whether the person is praiseworthy at all. That reason is no less present in immediacy or without inference is also why, other things being equal, the one who acts without a second thought is *more* praiseworthy than someone who issues the same rebuke for the same reasons only after reflection or following a struggle to muster the courage.

For Emerson, Aristotle, and Aquinas alike, habit can enable *ethically* ordered feeling and action that is non-inferential but nonetheless imbued with reasoned consideration and judgment. That the actions and feelings such habits enable do not *now* or *always* require reflection, self-consciousness, explicit deliberation, and the like does not mean they are not expressive of and suffused with reason and judgment. To “breathe our character,” to come to be in the world in this or that way, has a history. And that history, as the various imagined versions of Lucy are meant to suggest, is often long, complicated, and fraught, and always full of reasoning, consideration, and deliberation—whether our own, a community's, or most likely some combination. That we so breathe our virtue and vice, seeing, feeling, and responding in these particular ways, is because we have been *trained* to, by ourselves or by others.

²⁷I do not have in mind anything particularly complicated here. On this account, reasons like “Because what he said was wrong!” or “You shouldn't treat folks like that!” or accounts like “He was treating her badly” or “It was wrong, and I knew I had to do something,” would all be entirely adequate.

Dreyfus and Kelly, in contrast, seem to collapse the distinction between the *conceptual* or *rational* and the *inferential* or *deliberative*, to imagine that deploying concepts or engaging reason requires explicit deliberation, with its detachment and non-immediacy. This is why they move from the obviously non-inferential character of *physis* and its immediacy to assuming and insisting on its alleged non- or anti-rational character. But this is surely mistaken. Indeed, in nearly all of their *own* paradigm cases of whooshing up, a condition for the possibility of the experience is the particular *meanings*, the concepts, that the experience implicates. So much as to have the experience requires active engagement of mind and will, conceptual judgment and ordered loves. Thus, it is because Myles *loves* the Red Sox and regards their victory as *good* that he rises in joy at the home run, as he would not if he were indifferent or, far worse, a Yankees fan. Such love engages and expresses standing convictions and cares, commitments and judgments about what is valuable and why. It is also a product of myriad decisions and considerations that implicate reason and explicit consideration. If such *reason-laden* and *care-engaging* commitments are not implicated here and now, he will no more be moved by the home run than if he is busy deliberating about and considering what is happening. Immediacy and reason are *both* requisite for *physis*. At another level still, even to understand this *as* a home run requires mastery and facility not only with the concept *home run* but countless others that go into understanding baseball, all of which implicate reason. Thus, once Myles did not know who the Red Sox were nor love them, nor did he know what a home run was or have the capacity to recognize one. The person who is wondering “Wait, what just happened? Can’t they still tag him out?” or who says “I do not speak English fluently, what did King just say?”, who does not *understand*, is no more a candidate for whooshing up than the person who does not love, desire, and care in certain ways.

The virtuous person readily and (usually) unhesitatingly does the right thing in the right way (which includes with right feeling) at the right time. But for a great many things, doing them *in the right way* involves doing them *without* explicit deliberation or inference. While *self-consciousness* or *explicit deliberation* may well foreclose *physis*, it is mistaken to imagine that ethical responsibility and judgment always requires that. Virtue is precisely the stable disposition of will and passions to respond rightly *and* non-inferentially. The action and passion they effect and embody do not *await* but *express* rational judgment. In this way, the virtuous are open to and moved by good *physis* alone: even in whooshing up they remain wise.

Virtue allows its possessor to engage *physis responsibly*. It dissolves the dichotomy between a critical detachment that counts the ethical cost at the expense of missing all that shines and a surrender of agency and self to the herd’s mediocrity or, worse, perpetuation of horrendous evil. In Emersonian terms, it preserves, secures, and expresses “the independence of solitude” even in the midst of the crowd. While Emerson, Aquinas, and their heirs may disagree about good’s metaphysical status, they can agree on much of its material specification, much of what its just pursuit rules out or commends.²⁸ Most importantly, they envision virtue as

²⁸ See Stout (2014).

enabling non-deliberative but conceptually structured and laden judgments, actions, and affective responses. They see that its exercise demands not studied self-consciousness or explicit deliberation—what Emerson calls “prospect” and “retrospect,” a contrived “consistency”—but allows for the non-self-consciousness *physis* demands, even as it enables discernment and rejection of vicious varieties. Such virtue is the cleft in the rock, the place of perfect independence amidst ecstatic community.

10.7 Conclusion

In my view, when it comes to religious naturalism, Emersonians and their kin have far better to offer than hipster Heideggerians. But at the level of giving their vision broad appeal, making it rival Dreyfus and Kelly or “new atheism” for the devotion of the “nones,” so far as I can tell they are hardly in the game.²⁹ How is it, in the United States no less, that *Heidegger’s* vision—that brand of religious naturalism—could be hailed by op-eds, the Colbert Report, and hip documentaries, while Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman remain nearly invisible, beyond their perfunctory and almost always misunderstood cameos in high school English classes or on the self-help shelf of the local bookstore? And how is it that such ethically suspect fruit could capture the imagination and spirit of philosophers as learned and skilled as Dreyfus and Kelly? Latter day heirs of Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau, consider all this no ode to dejection, but hear in it instead a chanticleer call.

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²⁹ Stanley Cavell is the closest thing to an exception, but I doubt many readers would want to argue that his thought is popularly or widely accessible.

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Chapter 11

A Peripheral Field. Meditations on the Status of Jewish Philosophy



Michael Zank

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the LORD your God. (Lev 23:22)

Abstract Using biblical text and rabbinic commentary on the law of “gleanings” (Lev 23:22) as example and metaphor, this essay locates the taxonomic place of Jewish philosophy on the margins of Jewish existence, arguing that the marginal, while not central, remains “as it ought to be.” It indicates boundaries and limits, but also demarcates transitions and intersections between particular and universal. Like the law of gleanings, which obliges the agriculturist to be mindful of those in need and limits landownership and possession, Jewish philosophy directs attention of an otherwise introverted community toward an outside that is to benefit from, as well as benefits, Jewish life. Traditionally skeptical, but in its modern version constructive and apologetic, Jewish philosophy fosters Jewish mindfulness of its own correlativity and intersectionality with a world beyond the boundaries of the covenant. In one direction, Jewish philosophy, while marginal in comparison with religiously constitutive fields such as biblical commentary and legal studies, thus remains anchored within, but also anchors, the law and its meanings. In the other direction, Jewish philosophy articulates the values of Jewish spirituality—from inside the Jewish experience—in universally accessible terms. Something similar may be said of the philosophies embedded in other religious traditions.

Keywords Judaism · Jewish philosophy · Religious studies · Bible · Marginality

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11.1 A Law of “Margins” in the Margins of the Law

In the middle of the ritual calendar of Leviticus 23, there appears a verse enjoining the Israelites to allow for the margins of the field to be left unreaped, so as to provide for the poor and the alien. For the same purpose you are not to pick up what fell to the ground as you gathered together the stalks of grain. The context for this injunction is the Feast of Weeks, which celebrates the wheat harvest. Under the late-seventh-century BCE regime of cultic centralization, established under Josiah of Judah (see 2 Kings 22–23 and cf. Deuteronomy 12), the cycle of agricultural festivals became a cycle of pilgrimage holidays that required of all male Israelites to appear “before YHWH” in Jerusalem three times a year and deliver their gifts to the royal shrine. In Persian or Hellenistic times, when Jerusalem functioned as a temple city, rules and regulations pertaining to agriculture and temple cult were put in writing and became subject of scriptural interpretation.¹ The harvest *cum* pilgrimage festivals acquired new meanings.² The obligation to leave the margins of the field unharvested and gleanings uncollected to provide for the poor and the alien was now enshrined in Mosaic Law. But what was the reason why it appeared in the middle of a ritual calendar? What is this statement about the margins of the field doing in the margins of ritual law?³

The eleventh-century French-Jewish Torah commentary of R. Shlomoh Yitzhaki, better known by his acronym Rashi, notes that the appearance of the law of margins and gleanings in the middle of a festal calendar required explanation. The one he provides, relying on halakhic midrash⁴ and Talmudic precedent, is that following the commandments of gleanings and field-margins is equivalent to offering one’s sacrifices at the temple. Here is the wording of the relevant passage (Source: sefaria.org):

R. Abdimi the son of R. Joseph said: What reason had Scripture to place it (the law concerning the corner of the field) amidst those regarding the festival-sacrifices — those of Passover and Pentecost on this side of it, and those of the New Year, Day of Atonement and “the Feast” (Tabernacles) following on that side of it? To teach you that he who leaves the gleanings, the forgotten sheaf and the corner of the field to the poor as it ought to be, is regarded as though he had built the Temple and offered his sacrifices therein (cf. Sifra, Emor, Chapter 13, 11).

¹The argument I am making does not depend on when the law was written. It only depends on the shift from orality to writing. On this complex question see Schniedewind (2004).

²At some point, the Feast of Weeks began to be commemorated as the season of the giving of the Torah at Sinai/Horeb, in other words, its meaning became detached from the natural cycle. Presumably, this substitution took place after the destruction of the second temple.

³The law is stated once before, in Lev 19:9, where it follows on a sacrificial law. In both places it appears “orphaned” or out of context.

⁴Midrash halakhah, or halakhic midrash, refers to a genre of rabbinic exegetical literature, that commented on legal, not narrative, material of the Torah. Extant versions from the schools of R. Ishmael and R. Akiba include midrashim on Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, but not on Genesis.

The rabbis were concerned with the absence of the temple because that absence deprived the Jews of the opportunity to observe all 613 commandments of the Torah. There is an anxiety that arises from this deprived state of affairs. Those who see the observance of the Mosaic commandments as the only divinely provided way for a Jew to acquire merit in the eyes of the deity during his or her lifetime will always feel that Jewish life remains incomplete without the restoration of the temple and the ordained sacrifices. Rashi's commentary reasserts the rabbinic view that the observance of commandments that can be fulfilled in the absence of the temple may be deemed equivalent to the observance of ritual commandments tied to temple and sacrifice, especially if the odd placing of the law of field fringes and gleanings in the middle of laws pertaining to the service at the holy temple may be taken to suggest such an equivalence. This is not to say that the rabbis were sanguine about the status of the temple or the misery of exile and its concomitant vulnerability and dependence on the goodwill of gentile (in Rashi's case: Catholic) authorities. The Jews themselves were strangers in a foreign land, much as Abraham and Moses, yet their noble and ancient legislation enjoined them to think of themselves *as if* they were the landowners, and in a position to share of the generous bounty of the Promised Land with those less fortunate than them.

Jewish text and interpretation reflect the vagaries of four millennia of Jewish historical and social experience enshrined in carefully preserved and ever renewed institutions of memory going back to the Bronze Age. Within this complex world of linguistic and non-linguistic institutions of memory, philosophy plays a marginal, though perhaps not insignificant, role.

11.2 Biblical Wisdom in the Margins of the Canon

Jewish philosophy may take the form of wisdom (*hokhmah*), including skeptical wisdom, a genre of thought and writing we find within the biblical canon (*Tanakh*) itself. Tradition ascribes these works of wisdom to King Solomon as their primordial author, just as Psalms are associated with David, and Law with Moses. Canonical wisdom books include the Book of Proverbs (*Mishle*), Job (*Iyyov*), and Ecclesiastes (*Qohelet*). The genre of wisdom continued to flourish in the late Second Temple Period, as attested in texts that survive in their Greek versions or that were composed in Greek to begin with. These include the Book of Siracides or Ben Sira, originally composed around 190 BCE in Jerusalem, the Hellenistic Wisdom of Solomon, and the Stoic-inspired Fourth Maccabees.

Wisdom texts included in the third part of the Jewish biblical canon may serve as public readings on certain occasions, but they are not treated as *Haftarot* or prophetic conclusions to the annual or triannual reading cycles of Torah. This is evident from the absence of special blessings that are only said before and after readings from the Torah and Prophets. Thus, for example, the Book of Lamentations is read on the ninth of Av, the fast day in commemoration of the destruction of first and second temple. Instead of blessings, the reading is followed by *kinot* or dirges.

Some congregations read the Book of Ecclesiastes on a Sabbath falling between the beginning and end of Sukkot (Booths/Tabernacles), but the reading is not couched in blessings. The reading of Ruth on Shavuot/the Feast of Weeks is likewise unaccompanied by the blessings required for the reading of the *Haftarah*. Very few congregations traditionally read the Book of Job, while Proverbs and Psalms are liberally strewn across the prayers and recitations of every Sabbath and holiday. The Song of Songs is read on a Shabbat that falls within the intermediate days of Passover.

What does this tell us about the status of biblical wisdom, esp. its skeptical variant? First of all, biblical wisdom is unequal to Torah (law) and *Neviim* (former and latter prophets). The genre is represented, but only by few books, and its position in the biblical canon and in the liturgy of the synagogue is marginal.

Another place to look for ancient Jewish philosophical traditions is the world of Hellenistic Jewry, nurtured by the great library of Alexandria. It is well known that the works of Philo, who was neither the first nor the only member of the Alexandrian Jewish elite who bridged Greek *paideia* and the world of Jewish law and lore, were preserved by his Christian rather than his Jewish students. This marginalization of Philo reflects the cultural resistance of the Palestinian Rabbis, post-destruction, to the influence of Greek learning.⁵ The Christians on the other hand embraced, cultivated, and absorbed the works of Philo because his allegories of the Law provided a way to bridge the gap between Jewish text and Greek ideas. The Jewish authorities charged with the reconstruction of Jewish life in the absence of the temple, treated Greek and Hellenistic-Jewish philosophy as “alien wisdom.”

11.3 Skeptical Wisdom and Jewish Faith

Because of the overwhelming influence of Greek philosophy, which attained a kind of monopoly in the world of philosophical reasoning, the question of Jewish philosophy is usually posed in the form of “the wisdom of Japheth in the tents of Shem.” (See Horst (2002)) In our own age, where questions of identity and particularity have gained renewed traction, not just as a question of rights but as an epistemological conundrum, it seems a foregone conclusion that Judaism, however described or practiced, cannot be itself at the same time that it is also significantly engaged in the Greek, or Greek-inspired, pursuit we simply call philosophy. The hybrid of “Jewish philosophy” is often regarded as problematic. Leo Strauss famously wrote in his introduction to the University of Chicago Press edition of the *Guide of the Perplexed* that it is a well-known truth that one cannot be both a Jew and a philosopher (Strauss 1963).

⁵What is true for Palestinian rabbis who, as Saul Lieberman has shown, lived in a thoroughly Greco-Roman milieu, is even more true of the Babylonian rabbis who lived beyond the borders of the Roman Empire. See Lieberman (1965). Josephus’ propaganda on behalf of the Flavians was disseminated in Aramaic, not Greek.

Even as we have witnessed the establishment of the academic field of Jewish thought and philosophy as part of modern Jewish studies, Jewish philosophy remains somewhat marginal in the modern university and, with the demise of the Germanic matrix of modern Jewish philosophizing, even dated or at least reduced to an object of intellectual history.

Let us then proceed on the assumption that, despite its historical luminaries and the academic practitioners devoted to the study of their thought, Jewish philosophy is marginal to both Jewish studies and Judaism as a contemporary religious practice and orientation.

However, using the initial meditation on the law of fringes and gleanings as a prompt, I would like to argue that the peripheral is not necessarily marginal but may serve as a substitute for a more rooted pursuit that is absent or unavailable to us.

Rashi's commentary reminds us of the absence of the temple, which is a historical fact linked to the question of divine providence. For the Jewish believer, the way we fare depends on how we act or, more precisely, our actions have consequences not just for others, but also for ourselves, because that is how divine governance of the world works. Whether the deity is assumed to pay attention to particular individuals or only to the preservation of species, our actions have consequences in this world. Philosophical skepticism, which is well attested across the ages of Jewish philosophizing literature, casts doubt on precisely this claim. It is thus aligned with Cynicism and even Epicureanism; which is another reason why Jewish philosophy remained marginal: it raises questions that undermine the principles of the Jewish faith in divine governance (cf. Zank 2018). This stance is already evident in Qohelet, which means it represents a major strand in the tradition of Jewish wisdom (cf. Veltri 2018).

Staying with the image of the marginal taking the place of an absent center, Jewish philosophy renders what is absent for purely historical and hence contingent reasons as either necessarily doubtful or as principally absent as a tool of redemptive action in the world. It thus establishes itself as the judge of what is central and what is marginal, what is redemptive and what is not, at least from a critical epistemological and hence—to faith—marginal point of view.

Where philosophy is more than merely skeptical wisdom, i.e., where philosophy judges and condemns the religious domain as not just doubtful but as illusory, there and only there do we have a transition from a situation of center and margin to a margin that usurps the center by casting itself as the only remaining Archimedean point on which to stand, while leaving a huge gaping hole where the center used to be. Modern examples of Jewish thinkers who can be described in this way include Baruch Spinoza and Sigmund Freud.

It is in this principal opposition of the central and the marginal that we grasp the reason for Leo Strauss's harsh and seemingly unhistorical judgment of the irreconcilable opposition between philosophy and Judaism. Where wisdom remains merely skeptical, it is permitted to persist from the point of view of the center, which must cope with a temporary absence of the ritual core symbol of its own efficacy. Its own rather tenuous hold on reality confers temporary plausibility on the marginal.

Speaking in clear terms: Since the days of the Baghdad renaissance of the eighth to ninth century CE, Jewish legal authorities permitted Jewish philosophy to do its work of critical inquiry and the cultivation of a certain skeptical point of view, especially if that skepticism served the purposes of theological affirmation. With the transition from skepticism to the philosophical dogmatism of the Enlightenment critique of religion, however, philosophy “proper” has put itself outside the dialectic of margin and center by casting doubt on the principal significance and value of ritual practice and religious belief. Where philosophy teaches, in renewal of ancient Epicurean motifs, freedom from fear of the gods or from fear of God, it places itself outside the dialectic of margin and center. It is this position that Strauss saw as irreconcilable with Judaism.

Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* offers an excellent exposition of the potential of orthodox faith and skeptical reason to mutually reinforce one another. It is thus possible to consider Qohelet’s question, “Who knows whether (in the end) the spirit of humans goes up and the spirit of animals goes down?” as a mere statement on our lack of certainty when it comes to “ultimates,” to use Robert Neville’s term. An orthodox reading of Qohelet would suggest that the royal author of this wisdom text calls into question our ability to know the secrets of divine providence. At the same time, Qohelet leaves epistemic room for faith. In this system, center and margin, i.e. ritual performance and skeptical wisdom, mutually reinforce one another.

This should not come as a surprise. Nor is skeptical wisdom the only form of expression of critical attention to “the one thing that matters.” Biblical prophets and palmists as well call into question the efficacy of *ex opere operato* ritual performance (see Amos 5:21 ff, Psalm 51:16–17) and call for the pursuit of justice, equity, and moral action instead. Skeptical wisdom is therefore not the exclusive domain of the biblical critique of ritual practice. Like the obligation of fringes and gleanings, the correlate to ritual practice (in this case: offering sacrifices and rejoicing in the wealth of the produce of a land “flowing with milk and honey”) is to provide for those less well off. In the language of Deuteronomy: “Justice, justice pursue!” (Deut 16:20). (Cf. Zank 2012)

The medieval exegete attends to a situation of radical imbalance. Where the original biblical idea seems to be the one just mentioned (namely: the celebration of divine providence as experienced in a successful harvest must be balanced out by the provisions made for the poor, which is an antidote to greed), the medieval situation requires that attention to the poor and underprivileged may substitute for the absence of the possibility of giving G-d what is, by right, G-d’s. The poor thus substitutes for G-d in that I cannot give to G-d, but I can give to the poor, and G-d will reckon it to me as if I had given it to Him. Social action substitutes for ritual performance.

Nineteenth-century Jewish thought and twentieth-century Jewish theology embraced this doctrine of substitution as supported by Jewish sources and traditional commentary but also as congenial with what we might term the ethical turn of philosophy in the wake of Kant and German idealism. The moderate Enlightenment of Mendelssohn and the critical idealism of Kant allowed Jewish thinkers to project

Judaism as a “religion of reason” (Cohen 1919), one that fosters a rich inner life of the individual by harnessing the contemplative practice of ritual prayer to the moral pursuit of justice and benevolence toward the neighbor and the stranger (see Hollander).

11.4 Ritual and Social Obligation in the Law

The prohibitions of reaping to the edge of one’s field and of collecting the gleanings from the ground link two negative commandments to a positive one: *you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien*. This is reinforced by the statement, *I, YHWH, am your God*. In other words, the negation of the right to the full yield of one’s crops and the obligation to provide for the poor and the alien (*ger*), are directly linked to the special character of YHWH. To be covenanted to YHWH requires living by the rules and regulations that come with acceptance of his grant of tenure in a land that YHWH owns and gives to whom He pleases. The same formula (*I YHWH [am] your god*) is also found in Ex 6:7, 16:12, 20:2, in Lev 11:44–45 and most frequently in the Holiness Code (Lev 18–19).

Holy (*qadosh*) literally refers to separation. Usually we understand this separation as a “clean cut” between sacred and profane, fit and unfit for consumption, day and night, true and false, etc. The separating out of the edge of the field and of the gleanings as portions for the poor and the alien are not, however, clearly delineated. Where does the edge begin? How much is one to leave? What is the minimum? When does charity become excessive? Maimonides famously counsels against excessive charity as it would turn the owner into a pauper who, in turn, depended on the charity of others. Poverty as such is not a value. Yet it is taken for granted that there will be poor.⁶ To be an alien in a foreign land is, as the Israelites are frequently reminded, a misfortune. YHWH provides for those in need by imposing a limit on ownership, by obliging those who have to share with those who don’t. The system implied is one of double usufruct. YHWH owns the land, Israel enjoys the fruit of the land. And because YHWH owns the land he also takes care of the poor and alien who are permitted limited usufruct, mediated by law and measured by the generosity of the Israelite lessees of YHWH’s land. An *imitatio dei*.

By this, the Israelites are to distinguish themselves from those remembered as oppressors and exploiters, namely, the Egyptians, who had enslaved the Israelites, and the Canaanites, who had been the willing executioners of Egyptian *corvée* and surely added their own. Israel is not to imitate their ways. Positively speaking: you are to serve YHWH by keeping his laws, ordinances, and commandments.

Some of those laws are ritual, others are social obligations. Is it possible to worship YHWH by observing social obligations only, without also observing ritual obligations? Is it enough to observe the rites while ignoring the social concern of

⁶Cf. Matthew 26:11: “There will be poor always.”

Moses and the prophets? Not according to Leviticus 23, where the two are mentioned in one breath.

And yet, as we saw in Rashi's commentary, there remains a categorical difference between moral and ceremonial laws. Is ritual observance more central to Judaism than are the social obligations that are also part of the Torah? Is morality "supererogatory?" (Fox 1975) Are rituals central while morals are marginal? Not if both are commanded.

The traditional measure of Judaism is the body of ritual commandments represented in the *Shulkhan Arukh*, an early modern legal, perhaps even legalistic, compendium and the *vademecum* of orthodox Jews until this day. If morality is marginal relative to ritual, how much more marginal must be the pursuit of giving an account of the commandments, a pursuit that is widely shunned among the orthodox because it makes the authority of the commandments appear dependent on our own ability to rationalize, subjecting divine revelation to human justification and argument. Seen from the ritual center, giving reasons for the commandments is equivalent to raising the question of Euthyphro: do the gods command the good because it is good, or is it good only because the gods command it? As if God and the Good were two different things! (cf. Lobel 2011) An idle question, if the entire system is based on revealed legislation. On the other hand, what if "to know God" is part of that legislation? Isn't then philosophy itself part of the law? Are Jews commanded to pursue philosophical reason, which is, without a doubt, the best way to raise the question of knowledge and its highest object, the knowledge of knowledge? (Strauss 1935) But what is the place of such a pursuit, even if we are obliged to pursue it? To raise the question of the place of a commandment within a body of laws runs the risk of attaching more or less importance to one or another set of laws. Maimonides, who was the first to codify Talmudic law, did exactly that. The first of 14 volumes of his *Code (Mishneh Torah)* is called the "Book of Knowledge" (*Sefer ha-Madda*), and it starts with the "foundational laws of the Torah" (*Hilkhote yesodei ha-Torah*). (See Twersky 2010) Very clearly, this implies a value judgment, as the laws that provide the foundation for the other laws are clearly indispensable, whereas those built on these foundations may be less clearly indispensable. Unless, of course, one of the principle foundations is that nothing must be added or subtracted from these laws.

11.5 Modern Jewish Philosophy as Defense and Affirmation of Jewish Ritual Obligation

Modern Jewish philosophy – from Mendelssohn to Rosenzweig – was a philosophical defense of the centrality of ritual to Jewish religious life and of the compatibility of Jewish ritual and the religious life constituted by it to the civic life of the Jew in a larger world (a principality, a nation-state) defined by cosmopolitan ideals. How did it happen that Jewish philosophy took the defense of something as its task

toward which it used to position itself as skeptical? In other words, how did Jewish philosophy become a force of affirmation of the ritual particularity of the Jews, and by extension of ritual as such?

To tell this story would require a much longer chapter. It requires an investigation of modern Jewish philosophy (see Zank 2016).

11.6 Trespassing Encouraged

The marginal and peripheral is marginal and peripheral only in relation to the central. But what is on the other side of the margin or periphery? On the margin or periphery of one's field is a path, a way for the poor or alien to approach and take what is theirs by divine right. Beyond the margin is what the margin is for. The margin is not for the sake of the center, but for what lies beyond the margin or periphery. The center, the fruit of my labor that I am permitted to use, is mine. But margin and gleanings belong to someone else. The commandment turns what I could otherwise regard as mine into something that belongs to another. Everything belongs to God, but some of what God has given to me really belongs to someone else. The law of gleanings allows others onto my field. It allows them to help themselves to something that might have been mine, where it not for the divinely imposed generosity and hospitality that is not elective (*reshut*) but required (*hovah*). Divine law forces me to permit others onto my field. No "no-trespassing" signs allowed. At the same time that I am commanded to bring my gifts and remember YHWH's generosity the law reminds me of the existence of others. While I appear before YHWH, others may be in my field, helping themselves. Since it is not their field, they are not obliged to tithe their gleanings. They are not obliged to send their gifts to the temple. They are, in a significant sense, free of obligation and yet provided for.

Jewish philosophy speaks a language that is mindful of the fact that on the other side of its marginal pursuits there are others who may be present and listen to what we have to offer. It is on their behalf that Jews are called to form a kingdom of priests (Ex 19:6) and are called to be holy, just as YHWH is holy (cf. Lev 19:2, 20:26). The laws are written with a view to the center but its fruits are to be shared with those on the outside. It is the public face of an otherwise intensely private and sometimes forbiddingly exclusive religion. Grown on the same soil as Jewish ritual and nourished by the same nutrients, Jewish philosophy is that part of the Jewish experience that is left standing, timelessly, an invitation to those beyond the margins to partake of the fruits of the Jewish spirit.

We no longer need to wonder in what sense Jewish philosophy may be considered peripheral. It is doubly peripheral, namely, to what goes on the outside, and to what goes on on the inside. The question remains why Jewish *philosophy* is adequate to play this role, not just as seen from without but also as seen from within. It is adequate toward the outside because it speaks the common language of philosophical reason. At first blush that language, which is shared with others, is what renders Jewish philosophy marginal or peripheral to Judaism "as such." But we have

already seen evidence to the contrary. The margin is not on the outside but it is part of the field, just as the gleanings are part of the crop. Jewish philosophy is part of Judaism. This is what makes it an outsider in the world of philosophy and an insider in the world of Judaism. But within that world of Judaism, Jewish philosophy is that institution that takes seriously the dual character of the law itself: it is not just agricultural but also social; and it is not just social but also intellectual. For it does not merely command to appear before the LORD but it also commands to leave behind margin and gleanings to the poor and the alien. And the Feast of Weeks is not just an agricultural festival of thanksgiving but also a commemoration of Sinai and the Giving of the Torah. And the commandments of the Torah include the obligation to love God, which is to know God. But there is no knowledge without knowledge of knowledge, and hence philosophy. Just like the law of the margin and the gleanings that a stranger might take for herself with impunity, so the philosophical character of the Torah is open to anyone who might partake of it.

11.7 Jewish Philosophy: “as it Ought to be”

Rashi’s commentary, or rather the Talmudic passages adduced by Rashi, offers a further insight. Here is the text one more time.

R. Abdima the son of R. Joseph said: What reason had Scripture to place it (the law concerning the corner of the field) amidst those regarding the festival-sacrifices — those of Passover and Pentecost on this side of it, and those of the New Year, Day of Atonement and “the Feast” (Tabernacles) following on that side of it? To teach you that he who leaves the gleanings, the forgotten sheaf and the corner of the field to the poor as it ought to be, is regarded as though he had built the Temple and offered his sacrifices therein (cf. Sifra, Emor, Chapter 13, and 11).

The law concerning the corner of the field doesn’t just appear anywhere but it appears in a particular position relative to the remainder of the festal calendar. More precisely, it appears between the spring festivals of Passover and Pentecost (the Feast of Weeks) on one side and the fall holidays of New Year, Atonement, and Tabernacles or Sukkot. Why in that place on the calendar? In the rabbinic calendar, the space between spring and fall is marked by the observance of the ninth of Av, the time in the middle of the summer when Jews mark the destruction of the first and second temple, which occurred on the same day, though more than 500 years apart. Hence, the position of the law concerning the corner of the field *teach(es) you that he who leaves the gleanings, the forgotten sheaf and the corner of the field to the poor as it ought to be, is regarded as though he had built the Temple and offered his sacrifices therein.*

Benevolence is equivalent to rebuilding temple and offering sacrifice. Almsgiving is equivalent to tithing. Moral conduct substitutes for ritual performance. Does this mean that, when the temple will be rebuilt (speedily in our days), that benevolence will cease? Not according to R. Abdima b. Joseph. For to him, leaving gleanings, forgotten sheafs, and the corner of the field to the poor is *as it ought to be!* In other

words, any decent human being would agree that this is the proper way to act. In this brief aside, the commentator opens up the house of Jewish ritual toward the outside: *of course* you would leave something for others. “If I am only for myself, what am I?” is one of Hillel’s famous statements. Jewish philosophy thus remains tasked with the ever-challenging task of bridging between outside and inside, universality and particularity, morality and ritual. It is contingent on the assumption that this is *as it ought to be*.

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Chapter 12

Nearly Neighbors: Reflections on Philosophy of Religion and Its Close Encounters with Modern Jewish Thought



Sarah Hammerschlag

Abstract Sarah Hammerschlag's essay "Nearly Neighbors: Reflections on Philosophy of Religion and its close encounters with Modern Jewish Thought" considers the role of Modern Jewish Thought in the history of the Philosophy of Religions and by way of three examples shows how the encounters between Judaism and philosophy in the modern era have served as sites of negotiation. In the process, Hammerschlag proposes that philosophy of religion should be considered less as a discipline focused on the validity of concepts and more as one that investigates their historical emergence and evaluates their subsequent usage and dissemination.

Keywords Judaism · Philosophy of religion · Modern jewish thought · Moses Mendelssohn · Emmanuel Levinas

In Kevin Schilbrack's (2014) *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto*, he calls philosophy of religion "the least reflexive discipline in religious studies." Given that reflexivity is perhaps the primary attribute of any philosophical endeavor, the irony of such a claim should be lost on no one. Schilbrack's point is in the service of a larger critique of the narrowness of the sub-discipline and refers to what could be called a greater reflexive turn in the study of religion toward the historicity of the very concept of religion. While it might be more appropriate to say that philosophy of religion has been insular rather than unreflexive in this regard, particularly as it has been practiced by scholars working from within the Christian tradition either to defend or to discredit the faith commitments of practitioners within those communities, the upshot is the same: philosophy of religion seems less concerned

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with the cultural constitution of the terms of its engagement than many of the other subfields within religious studies.

Schilbrack is not alone in his concern for how this insularity might impact the future of philosophy of religion. Timothy Knepper's *The Ends of Philosophy of Religion*, also published in 2013, makes similar criticisms with more extreme rhetoric, going as far as calling the discipline useless in its current configuration, and calling for more cross-cultural comparison and "thick description" in the field (Knepper 2013, 3). Thomas Lewis's 2015 *Why Philosophy Matters for the Study of Religion & Vice Versa* takes up these issues most recently and pays particular attention not only to philosophy of religion's lapses in regard to the historical construction of its turn. Lewis highlights the powerful potential of philosophical analysis by virtue of its self-conscious method to contribute to the meta-level discourse so crucial to Religious Studies at this juncture and so crucial as well to the broader academic and public discourse on religion, increasingly taking place across the social sciences and humanities: in political science, economics, anthropology, cognitive science, literature and history (Lewis 2015, 7).

In recounting the how and the why of the current position of philosophy of religion within the larger field of Religious Studies and also in providing recommendations for its brighter future, all three of these books share one more common feature: they all pay merely cursory attention to the position of Judaism within the field. Ironically I think the reason for this oversight is at the same time the reason why the history of Modern Jewish Thought is so crucial to correcting the very lapse that all three books see as endemic to the field. Unlike Philosophy of Religion's other others, Judaism was in fact an absolutely necessary foil to the early determinations of the field: the nearest site of exclusion. Judaism's proximity thus disqualifies it from serving as a proposed site of expansion in the field, and its marginality excludes it from representing the proper site of philosophy of religion's development. But this liminal position is exactly what makes it an important site for investigating the claim that the field is dogged by its own lack of reflexivity about its terms. The history of modern Judaism was and is particularly important to thinking through the relationship between philosophy and religious studies because of the crucial role it played in the crafting of boundaries between its two terms.

Not only was a negative representation of Judaism a byproduct of the process of demythologization so necessary to the distillation of the rational core of religion, it was also a historic partner in the process of formulating the concept of natural religion, a key component to both the specific history of philosophy of religion and to the first comparative studies that engendered "religion" as an object of study.

That said, the history of the relationship between modern Judaism and philosophy of religion has been well documented, so my task here is not to rehearse that story but rather to argue here for its significance to the very question foregrounded by these books, particularly as Lewis has phrased it, that is to say, for illustrating

“why philosophy matters for the study of religion & vice versa.”¹ In response to Lewis’s argument that the field had not always been attentive enough to the historical construction of its terms—to the dominant protestant context of its development, and to the prioritization of belief in the framing of its key questions--the case of modern Jewish Thought as a field of study which might serve as a kind of counter-example, or at least a compelling test case for the assertion, for the very reason that it has consistently had an uneasy relationship with philosophy of religion.

At every step of its historical construction the philosophers formulating the terms that define the discipline had to take account of Judaism’s position vis-à-vis these terms and the Jewish thinkers negotiating their relation to both its terms--“philosophy” and “religion”--had to self-consciously consider the very questions that these recent books take up as though for the first time. Jewish thinkers had to consider how Christianity constructs itself as the universal, how the very terms of rational religion prioritize Christian concepts and perhaps most importantly they had to negotiate and reorient these concepts to argue for Judaism as an alternative exemplar.

In what follows, I will consider three examples from my own research and teaching that show the ways in which one can think about the encounter between philosophy and Judaism as providing some insight into the historical formulation of the field and its contemporary ramifications. My point is that the discourse of philosophy has been a site of negotiation for modern Judaism, a site by which the tradition has come to understand itself in terms of the category of religion, but also that the encounter between Judaism and philosophy in the modern era has provided a means to conceptualize the terms of philosophy and religion as counterpoised. That said, my proposal here does not necessarily amount to an endorsement of philosophical analysis as a method of inquiry within religious studies. In the case of my examples “philosophy of religion” is important less as a method and more as a site of historical encounter and negotiation, but I think my cases also importantly illuminate some of the key dynamics surrounding the historical construction and cultural specificity of both of these terms.

My first case to consider is Moses Mendelssohn’s *Jerusalem*. Published in 1783 in Berlin as a response to a brochure calling for Mendelssohn to admit that his public rejection of ecclesiastical power undermined the legitimacy of his faith. The pamphlet thus renewed earlier calls, namely Johann Caspar Lavitar’s, for Mendelssohn’s conversion to Christianity. Mendelssohn, already famous as the “Socrates of Berlin” for his metaphysical treatises and dialogues, was still an observer of Judaism and deeply invested in Jewish scriptural study and translation (see Altmann 1998). The book, made up of two parts, is in the first part a political

¹See in particular Willi Goetschel, *The Discipline of Philosophy and the Invention of Modern Jewish Thought* (2013) which tracks the relationship between the development of philosophy’s disciplinarity and the development of Modern Jewish Thought, showing in particular how this relationship reveals the necessary failure of philosophy’s universal aspirations. Equally important for thinking about the relationship between modern Judaism and the category of religion is Leora Batnitzky’s *How Judaism became a Religion* (2011).

treatise on the right relation of church and state--where the power of coercion would be confined to the state and the church would function only non-coercively--and in the second part a defense of Judaism as consistent with the model outlined in the first part. In other words Judaism is represented as a tradition ideally suited to Mendelssohn's version of the "secular" state. I want to focus on Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* here not to revive the debates that take place between its covers, but rather to claim it as a text which dramatizes the points I've made above, both the meta-point about the marginalization of Judaism in discussions about the cultural construction of the terms of Religious Studies and my claim for its importance as a site for thinking about the relation of philosophy to religion and the position of Judaism in the formulation of those boundaries.

I recently made this text the central focal point around which I organized a class on the Introduction to the Study of Religion. Not surprisingly, the masters-level students who made up the course initially greeted my choice with resistance. The text seemed neither canonical enough for the students of theology and ethics hoping to get further grounding in the Christian tradition nor subversive enough for those already suspicious of the Christian biases they identified as undergirding the field. I chose Mendelssohn's text because I thought it could help the students to think about the theme of religious pluralism, and because it provides a number of interdisciplinary openings for a discussion of religion and politics, biblical studies, and literary theory. But I also wanted to suggest then and also here that it provides an excellent example of how philosophy of religion can contribute to current debates within Religious Studies. And furthermore that it reveals how the history of modern Judaism is central to this claim. One of my conceits in the course was in fact that Mendelssohn's text provides an interesting—if not rejoinder—than at least nuance to Talal Asad's claim in *Genealogies of Religion* concerning the role that the concept of "natural religion" played in skewing the representation of other traditions, by allowing them to be defined and judged according to criteria of belief, the turn to which marked a shift even within the Christian tradition.

For both J.Z. Smith and Talal Asad, two of the thinkers that Lewis rightly credits as having drawn attention to the historical construction of the term religion as an instrumental concept for cultural comparison, the key node in their account concerns the role of natural religion as a pivot in the story (Lewis 2015, 2–3). Beginning in the seventeenth century, proponents of natural religion argued that knowledge of God's existence and nature, and indeed all that is necessary to ensure eternal felicity is universally accessible to human reason and does not depend upon scripture as a source. Such an understanding, they argued, is the only one consistent with an omnipotent and beneficent God. The value of this concept of natural religion is of course also what allows us now to see it as fundamentally skewed by Christianity and thus hegemonic: it provided a conception of religion as trans-historical and transcultural and created the "illusion," as Asad puts it, that, "religion could be conceived as a set of propositions to which believers gave assent which could be judged and compared" (Asad 1993, 41).

In referring to this argument here, I do not raise it in order to contest Asad's claim, but rather to point to the fact that he treats the construction of the category of

natural religion as a monolithic history, a story of how Christianity enforced a hierarchy of values that makes belief the central component of religion. In my class I argued that if we consider the role of Spinoza and Mendelssohn in this story what appears is a more nuanced negotiation, a dialogue between Judaism and Christianity by which Mendelssohn in particular is able to suggest that the failure of the Jewish tradition to conform to the Christian model of belief, a point he concedes--going as far as intimating that Hebrew has no word for religion--is in fact what makes it a better tradition for negotiating the moral and political demands of modern civic life (Mendelssohn 2011, 162). It is the role of reason in natural religion that makes such a move possible. For if reason obviates the need for faith, then revealed religion must serve another purpose. And Christianity is even to be faulted for including dogmatic components that require assent but fall outside the bounds of reason.² Mendelssohn thus takes the classic anti-Jewish argument that Judaism is legalistic and outmoded and suggests that the commandments function as a prophylactic against conceptual idolatry.

The ceremonial law itself is a kind of living script, rousing the mind and heart, full of meaning, never ceasing to inspire contemplation and to provide the occasion and opportunity for oral instruction. What a student himself did and saw being done from morning till night pointed to religious doctrines and convictions and spurred him on to follow his teacher... (Mendelssohn 1983, 102).

The law's purpose is to inspire thoughts of the divine, he suggests, but without the danger that the worshiper will mistake symbol for referent. "The truths useful for the felicity of the nation as well as of each of its individual members were to be utterly removed from all imagery" (Mendelssohn 1983, 119). Instead they productively elicit conversation and instruction. The text, I ultimately argued, is a plea for religious pluralism, one that suggests that the opacity between symbol and referent and indeed between speaker's intention in conversation and his listener's comprehension are civilly productive.³

While I endorsed Mendelssohn's message to some degree, my point both now and then was not to suggest that we should be reading *Jerusalem* as a purely philosophical text and thus devote our energy to evaluating the validity of its claims, but rather to suggest that as a classic text of philosophy of religion read within the context of religious studies it serves a very different purpose, one that might help us

²"It is true that I recognize no eternal truths other than those that are not merely comprehensible to human reason but can also be demonstrated and verified by human powers. Yet Mr. Morschel is misled by an incorrect conception of Judaism when he supposes that I cannot maintain this without departing from the religion of my fathers. On the contrary I consider this an essential point of the Jewish religion and believe that this doctrine constitutes a characteristic difference between it and the Christian one" (Mendelssohn 1983, 89).

³Mendelssohn makes this point in two places: first in section I, describing how misunderstandings with friend produces tolerance (67) and then again in the final pages of section II where he contrasts such an understanding of tolerance, predicated on disagreement with a vision of accord that would "confine within narrow bounds the now liberated spirit of man" (137). For more on Mendelssohn, pluralism and tolerance, see Erlewine 2010 and Zager 2015. My thinking on Mendelssohn and tolerance owes much to conversation with Sarah Zager on Mendelssohn.

think differently about philosophy of religions as a discipline *within* religious studies.

No doubt, my students certainly engaged in philosophical analysis of Mendelssohn's claims, but more importantly they learned to treat philosophical argument as a strategic mechanism within the history of religions, to see how Mendelssohn exploited the concept of natural religion and the philosophical arguments germane to it in order to carve out a space for Judaism in the modern context. And along the way, my choice of the text for the class began to make more sense. It provided a new decentering perspective on a canonical story and at the same time established a site of early comparison and contemplation for thinking about how to negotiate the legacy of a colonizing power.⁴

According to this model philosophy of religion could serve as a site of translation and negotiation between traditions, the history of which has been predominantly Christian, but in which Judaism has played an important role, most often, it is true, as the denigrated other, the counter example which allowed Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche, among others, to conceptualize the relationship between philosophy and Christianity. Yet this dynamic, I want to suggest, is one that was not lost on the Jewish representatives participating in the conversation. The strategic moves by which these representations were produced, the history and politics at play in these negotiations are much harder to forget when your own tradition is represented and produced as its byproduct.

While under a certain conception of philosophy of religion the process of this cultural and strategic operation might seem extraneous to its method, a method whose operations often focus on excluding the contingencies of historical circumstances in order to better isolate rational argumentation, it strikes me that the call for reflexivity in the field requires the foregrounding of the historical construction of its categories. According to such a model, philosophy would itself be treated as a historical tradition and a canon subject to the tools of humanist inquiry by methods similar to those used within the field to examine what we have more properly categorized as "religious" traditions. In the case of its relationship to Judaism we can thus examine the history of the encounter between the two traditions, especially as a site of mediation between Judaism and Christianity.

With this model in mind, I turn to my second example. It takes us to early twentieth century France and to a moment when philosophy for Jews was very clearly understood as a means to shed particularity, to secure an identity aligned with the French Republic. It is striking to consider that in the first decades of the Twentieth Century each of the three most prominent branches of French philosophy had assimilated Jews as their figureheads. Léon Brunschvicg, whose references to "religion" eschew Judaism for Hellenic and Christian sources, was the leading figure in French Idealism (DL 73; DF 43) (see Brunschvicg 1958, 209–219). Emile Durkheim, son of a rabbi, was the leader after Comte in French positivist thought, and Henri

⁴To make the later point we turned to Aamir Mufti's brilliant book, *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (2007) which effectively uses Mendelssohn toward these ends.

Bergson, whose Jewish background can perhaps only be detected in the vehemence of his rebellion against the legalist nature of Judaism, was the guiding light of spiritualism.⁵

One explanation for the prominence of assimilated Jews in French philosophy in the beginning of the Twentieth Century was the elevated status of the discipline of philosophy in the Third Republic. For idealists like Brunschvicg, the exactitude of reason was a replacement for religion (Brunschvicg 1951, 8–9). Through its method of abstraction, Brunschvicg suggested, idealist philosophy could provide an ethic and an orientation. And indeed, if philosophy could replace religion, if it could be the means to a shared humanist project, Jews could not only participate equally in this new faith, but could be its prophets, in and through their absolute willingness to divest themselves of any particularist allegiances. In this version of the quest for truth, wrote Brunschvicg when canvased on the status of contemporary humanism, “we will be the worthy heirs to the Greeks only in so far as we succeed at being the contemporaries of our civilization as they were of theirs” (Brunschvicg 1951, 8–9).

In the early years of his philosophical career Emmanuel Levinas seemed to have found philosophy attractive for similar reasons and he would, even after his philosophical ideals shifted, always praise Brunschvicg for his commitment to universalism, for what he saw as the selflessness or disinterestedness of that position. He seemed furthermore to feel buoyed by the position of Jews within philosophy’s highest strata. In a 1986 interview with François Poirié he credited the very mention of the Dreyfus affair by Maurice Pradines, a philosopher and early pioneer of psychology at the University of Strasbourg with inclining him toward the study of philosophy. When asked why he chose to study philosophy, he replied, “You know among the Jews of Eastern Europe the name of Dreyfus was known everywhere. Old Jews with beards who had never seen a Latin letter in their life spoke of Zola as a saint. And then, suddenly, in front of me, a philosopher in the flesh chose this as an example” (Poirié 1987, 70).

No doubt the strength of the discipline of philosophy in the first two decades of the twentieth century was a direct response to the Third Republic’s secularization of the state following the Dreyfus affair. If institutionalized religion was to be marginalized, it had to be replaced. The discipline of philosophy, inculcated not through churches, but through schools. It was to serve as religion’s replacement (Gutting 2001, 3–4). It is no surprise then that the *École normale supérieure*, the *grande école* for training France’s teachers, would rise to extraordinary national prominence during this period, or that philosophy would be its most prestigious discipline, or, in fact, that Jews seeking to cultivate and prove their identification with the nation state would be inordinately attracted to its universalizing promise (see Smith 1982). Yet, it is also all these factors which so quickly made the discipline of philosophy and its professors the target of so much criticism in the post-World War I era.

⁵As well as in his refusal to accept the exemption from anti-Semitic legislation offered to him by the Vichy government.

In a profound reversal of value, philosophy in France came to be seen as a Jewish discipline for its very claims to rational precision and universalism. By the 1930's in France, critiques of French philosophy emerge which accost both it and its institutions of dissemination as corrupted by Judaism. In 1938 Hubert Bourgin emphasized the Jewish commonality among France's leading intellectuals, devoting pages to their rabbinic physiognomy, attending to it as though it were evidence for their corrupting force (Bourgin 1938, 233).

One vestige of this reversal is the term "pharisaism," as a label for academic philosophy, particularly of the idealist neo-Kantian stand. Gabriel Marcel uses it in 1948 to ally himself—at least momentarily with Sartre—in a shared suspicion of thinking as lifeless order (Marcel 1954, 41). As Merleau-Ponty explains it, for Catholic Existentialist thinkers such as Marcel, those attempting to revive a new form of philosophical thinking more in touch with the exigencies of lived experience, the accusation of "pharasaism," served to accuse the tradition of Cartesian thought in France, and supported a return of the spirit/letter distinction, ideal for characterizing their own meditations on being as a revival of the spirit (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 75). Michael Fagenblat has pointed out the distinction had already surfaced in 1927 when Heidegger used the term to refer to the "the calculative rationalism of Kantian morality."⁶

I raise these episodes in the history of philosophy to highlight the fluidity in the valence of both terms in "Philosophy of religion," to show how philosophy came to function as a replacement for religion at one moment, but equally to show how despite eighteenth and nineteenth century arguments that Judaism was not even a religion, let alone one that could be purified into a philosophical form, philosophy itself came to be denigrated as the playground of the deracinated Jew, an arena for those who had lost touch with the organic streams of tradition and culture.

My final example involves one more reversal and one more site of negotiation between Judaism and philosophy in the post WWII context, when Jews sought to argue for the value of Judaism as opposed to philosophy, to argue for the Jewish tradition as a form of wisdom to be esteemed because it represented an interruption to or an alternative stream of tradition to philosophy. The most well known representative of this movement was Emmanuel Levinas.

Early on, like the earlier generations, Levinas saw the universalizing discourse of philosophy as a means to attain a status divorced from his background. But beginning in the late 1950's he was an active participant of a group of Jewish intellectuals seeking to demarcate the differences between Judaism and "Greek wisdom." He came thus to define religion as prophetic force breaking into and interrupting the totalizing logic of philosophical discourse. As he writes in the preface to his 1961 Magnum Opus, *Totality and Infinity*, "It is perhaps time to see in hypocrisy not only a base contingent defect of man, but the underlying rending of a world attached to both the philosophers and the prophets." It is time, he suggests, for a divorce between

⁶ See Fagenblatt 2016. In Martin Heidegger, Heidegger 1967, 291 and 293; Heidegger 1962, 337 and 340.

the true and the good. While he uses the generic term religion to designate that site of interruption, what tears into the harmonious logic of the whole, he elsewhere designates Judaism in identical terms: "As a prophetic moment of human reason ... Judaism is a rupture, an interruption of the natural and historical, a revelation always forgotten."

Levinas is often accused of having aligned Judaism too closely with philosophy, of having envisioned the possibility of translating the wisdom of Jewish sources into the philosophical, nonetheless the model by which he imagined the negotiation between the two terms was meant to oppose the apologetic reasoning of earlier representatives of the Jewish tradition, those who had sought to argue for the consonance of Judaism with the great truths of the philosophical tradition (see Batnitzky 2007). In his recent book Thomas A. Lewis associates this model of philosophy of religion, by which religion represents an interruption of reason, with the work of Hent de Vries for whom Levinas is a key resource for thinking religious alterity as "reason's other." He further suggests that when de Vries mobilizes these terms "he directs attention away from the construction of these concepts themselves." I don't disagree. Rather I would suggest a different role for Levinas's work in the philosophy of religions, one that contextualizes him among his Jewish contemporaries, thinking about him in relation, for example, to his colleague at the *Colloque des intellectuels Juifs de langue Française* Léon Ashkenazi who suggested at one point that the very claim to a synthetic relation between Judaism and the Greek idiom of philosophy represented a betrayal of the Jewish tradition.⁷ But also I would suggest reading Levinas as one in a long line of Jewish thinkers using the philosophical tradition as a means to negotiate the position and value of Judaism in his historical context. To call such an approach "philosophy of religion" may indeed seem like a

⁷Little known in this country, but an important Jewish intellectual in postwar France with a growing influence in Israel, even today, 20 years after his death, Askénazi spoke to an audience of young Jews in Paris, learning about their Jewish heritage but equally immersed in the philosophical culture of Paris in the 1950's. His claim, quite at odds with Mendelssohn's and far more radical than Levinas's, was that Judaism and philosophy represent two very different streams of tradition, both particularist in their origins and universalist in their aspirations. While philosophy is characterized by the human question, "the nostalgia of man without God," the Hebrew bible is characterized by wisdom "offering itself to man." The response of the Jewish tradition, while often overlapping in its concerns with philosophy, is fundamentally different in so far as it is a response to God's word. Askénazi did not deny that there had been historically a dialogue between Judaism and philosophy one represented by thinkers such as Judah Ha-Levy and Maimonides who spoke across traditions. But as representatives of the tradition of Jewish wisdom, he claimed, they spoke from a place of certitude, grounded in the tradition. It was this positioning via the status of revelation that made them Jewish thinkers. This could not be said for Spinoza, Bergson, or even Hermann Cohen. While this perspective is not fundamentally original or innovative, and represents a familiar perspective within the Orthodox strands of the tradition, what is worth noting about Askénazi is the function of such an argument in relation to his audience. He was not speaking from within a Jewish community to a congregation, but to an audience of university students in Paris, just as likely to be studying at the Sorbonne as they were to be attending one of Askénazi's lectures, to a group of students seeking to argue for the contribution of Judaism to the post-World War context, to find a means to critique the philosophical tradition or at the very least to argue for Judaism's unique contribution to it (Askénazi 1999).

misnomer, I don't deny it, if your model is Antony Flew or perhaps even Immanuel Kant, but to be invested in the relationship between philosophy and religion within the field of Religious Studies, it seems to me ought to be about the ways in which philosophical texts can be read for their intervention into the negotiation of the category of religion. I want to suggest here that in the case of modern Jewish thought the historical dynamics of the negotiation are impossible to miss, as is the constructed nature of both categories. If certain figures within what we now call philosophy of religion have nonetheless chosen not to focus on these dynamics out of deference to a certain de-historicized model of what constitutes philosophy of religion, I would suggest that attention to the historical emergence of the idea of philosophy of religion in relation to its theological precursors is one key means by which Religious Studies can re-orient the discipline. It is by considering philosophy of religion as itself *within* the larger field of religious studies, subject to the same demands to think through the historical construction of its terms that new versions of old stories emerge. Within this context, I have no doubt that the history of modern Judaism is pivotal to the field.

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Chapter 13

Who or What Created the World?

Bhāviveka's Arguments Against the Hindu Concept of God



M. David Eckel

Abstract In his commentary on the first verse of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikāḥ*, Bhāviveka discusses the Hindu concept of *īśvara* or "Lord" as one of several "no-causes" (*ahetu*) that allegedly have created the world. By "no-cause" he means that, while the Lord may exist, he does not perform the action of creating the world. In this sense, the Lord is like a woman who is "no-wife" or a son who is "no-son." They may exist, but they do not perform the actions that are appropriate to these particular social roles. Basing his argument on a verse in the *Mahābhārata* that speaks bitterly of the injustice of the Lord, Bhāviveka argues that a Lord who is capricious and cruel could not have created a world that is orderly and just. Instead, he proposes that, from a conventional point of view (*saṃvṛtyāpi*), the world is created not by a Lord, but by karma. Bhāviveka develops this argument further in two places in his own independent work, *The Verses on the Heart of the Middle Way* (*madhyamaka-hṛdaya-kārikāḥ*), and in its commentary *The Flame of Reason* (*Tarkajvālā*). In his further elaboration of the argument, he gives a vivid account of what he considers the moral inadequacies of the Lord in Hindu mythology, focusing not only on the terrifying and destructive aspects of Śiva as Rudra, but also on the morally questionable aspects of Viṣṇu as Kṛṣṇa the cowherd who destroys demons and seduces other men's wives. In the process, Bhāviveka gives us a distinctive and lively picture of the perennial conflict between Hindus and Buddhists about the role of the Lord in the creation of the world.

Keywords Bhāviveka · God · Lord · *īśvara* · Karma

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Abbreviations

- Derge *sDe-dge Tibetan Tripiṭaka bsTan ḥgyur Preserved at the Faculty of Letters, University of Tokyo*. Tokyo, 1977.
- MHK *Madhyamakahrdayakārikāḥ (Verses on the Heart of the Middle Way)* of Bhāviveka.
- MMK *Mūlamadhyamakakārikāḥ* of Nāgārjuna.
- PP *Prajñāpradīpa (Lamp of Wisdom)* of Bhāviveka.
- TJ *Tarkajvālā (Flame of Reason)* commentary on the *Madhyamakahrdayakārikāḥ* of Bhāviveka.

13.1 Introduction

If one were to choose the most famous verse from Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās*, there would be many strong candidates.¹ The text has many memorable verses, especially in the chapters on the self, the four noble truths, and nirvana. Of course, Nāgārjuna's verses are easy to remember for a reason: they were intended to fall easily off the tongue in the flow of a debate, like sharp rhetorical daggers directed at the opponents' most trusted arguments. But there is no verse more central than the one that begins the first chapter. It provides such a strong foundation for the rest of the text that the remaining chapters can be said to be nothing more than the application of this basic insight to the wide range of issues that Buddhists consider when they enumerate the categories of reality. The verse is incisive and sharp; it has the built-in symmetries that characterize Madhyamaka thought; and it leaves no doubt about its intended scope. It is meant to apply to everything, at any time, in any way. Even if you are not versed in Sanskrit, you can still feel the force of its negations simply from the repetition of the word "no" (*na*)²:

*na svato nāpi parato na dvābhyāṃ nāpy ahetutaḥ /
utpannā jātu vidyante bhāvāḥ kvacana kecana //*

In English we can convey the force of multiple negations even without repeating the word "no":

"There is nothing that has ever arisen anywhere from itself, from something else, from both, or from no cause." The meaning of this verse is sometimes masked by the formality of the term "arisen." But its intention is clear. It says simply that

¹This essay was first published in the *International Journal of Buddhist Thought and Culture* 29 (2019), 29–51. It is reprinted with the kind permission of the Academy of Buddhist Studies, Dongguk University, Korea.

²Quotations from the Sanskrit text of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās* are drawn from the text in Siderits and Katsura 2013.

nothing has ever come into being, or, to speak more colloquially, nothing has ever happened.

The assertion of no-arising that opens the first chapter repeats a formula in Nāgārjuna's expression of homage to the Buddha at the start of the text:

*anirodham anutpādam anucchedam aśāśvatam /
anekārtham anānārtham anāgamam anirgamam //
yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaṃ prapañcopaśamaṃ śivam /
deśayāmāsa sambuddhas taṃ vande vadatām varaṃ //*

I pay homage to the perfectly awakened one, the best of teachers, who taught dependent arising as the fortunate cessation of conceptual diversity, without cessation, without arising, without destruction, without permanence, without one thing, without many, without coming, without going.

That is, the Buddha taught dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*) in which there is no arising. In Sanskrit, the importance of no-arising is stressed by placing it as the second word in the verse: "No cessation and no arising are what the Buddha taught as dependent arising, and to him I pay homage." If the rest of the text is a footnote to the first verse of chapter one, then the first verse of chapter one is a footnote to Nāgārjuna's opening expression of praise to the Buddha.

13.2 The Possibility of Arising from No-Cause

The structure of Nāgārjuna's negation in verse 1.1 follows the familiar negative version of the tetralemma: not X, not non-X, not both X and non-X, and neither X nor non-X.³ This form of argumentation is found so widely in Madhyamaka literature that it is easy to overlook some of its local peculiarities. It should be clear what it means for something to arise from itself, from something, or from itself and something else. But what would it mean to arise from no cause? Isn't the idea of uncaused production inherently implausible? Why would it even be mentioned, except to convey a sense of logical completeness? In his commentary on this verse, Candrakīrti essentially dismisses the possibility of uncaused production.⁴ In this respect he differs little from Bhāviveka who says:

There is no inference to support the claim [that things arise from no cause], and [this claim] is contradicted by inference and common sense. It is contradicted by inference as follows: It is accepted conventionally (*kun rdzob tu / samvṛtyā*) that no internal sense media arise without a cause, because they have both universality and particularity (*spyir dang khyad par nyid / sāmānya-viśeṣa*), like a sprout. And it is contradicted by common sense (*grags*

³The relationship between this verse and other expressions of the tetralemma is discussed in Katsura 2000, 210.

⁴This passage is translated and discussed in MacDonald 2015, 148–52. Candrakīrti gives a somewhat more expansive discussion of uncaused production in *Madhyamakāvatāra* 6.99–103.

pa) as follows: It is generally accepted (*grags pa*) in this world that whatever exists arises from causes, just as a piece of cloth arises from threads and a grass hut arises from grass.⁵

Apart from Bhāviveka's penchant for the formulation of inferences, there is nothing unusual or unexpected about this argument. But then Bhāviveka takes a surprising turn. He focuses his attention on the term "no-cause" (*ahetu*) and proposes another possible meaning. Instead of taking the term as a non-implicative negation (Skt. *prasajya-pratiṣedha* / Tib. *med par dgag pa*), he takes it as the opposite—an implicative negation (Skt. *paryudāsa* / Tib. *ma yin par dgag pa*). With this simple move, he opens up a range of new possibilities that will be the focus of the rest of this essay.

First of all, what is the difference between these two kinds of negation?⁶ A non-implicative negation is like the sentence, "Devadatta is not a brahmin." It expresses simply a negation and does not imply any further possibility. In contrast, the sentence "Devadatta is a non-brahmin" implies that Devadatta is something other than a brahmin, presumably a member of one of the other castes.⁷ This additional implication makes the second sentence an "implicative negation." Bhāviveka generally prefers non-implicative negations, especially at the sentence level. When he is formulating arguments about ultimate truth, he is not interested in negations that imply other types of existence. He is making simple negations. But at the level of individual terms, implicative negations allow other possibilities, as in the case of no-cause. Is it possible, for example, that there are such things as "no-causes" by analogy with a caste that is "non-brahmin"? If so, what kinds of things would these be? By raising this possibility, Bhāviveka allows himself to consider a new category of causes and aggressively expand what might be called the doxographical implications of Nāgārjuna's verse.

Here it might be best to let Bhāviveka explain this possibility in his own words:

Alternatively, the word "no-cause" (*ahetu*) can mean a bad cause (*kuhetu*), as in the expression "no-wife" (*abhāryā*). What is a bad cause (*kuhetu*)? Intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*), the Lord (*īśvara*), primal man (*puruṣa*), unevolved nature (*pradhāna*), time (*kāla*), Nārāyaṇa, and so forth, because they are not real (Tib. *yang dag ma yin pa*). The idea is that things do

⁵*de ston pa'i rjes su dpag pa med pa'i phyir dang / rjes su dpag pa dang / grags pa'i gnod par 'gyur ba'i skyon yod pa'i phyir yang ngo zhes bya bar dgongs so ll de la rjes su dpag pa'i gnod pa ni kun rdzob tu khas blangs pa nang gi skye mched kyi dngos po rnam rgyu med pa las skye ba med de / spyi dang khyad par nyid dang ldan pa'i phyir / dper na myu gu bzhin no ll grags pa'i gnod pa ni 'jig rten 'di na yod pa gang yin pa de ni rgyu las skye bar grags te / dper na rgyu spun dag las snam bu dang / rtsi rkyang dag las sab ma skye ba la sogs pa bzhin no ll* (Derge, Tsha 50b / 5-7). My translations of *Prajñāpradīpa*, chapter one are adapted from Ames 1993, 209–59.

⁶The classic account of these two kinds of negation in the work of Bhāviveka is found in Kajiyama 1973, 161–75.

⁷The different placement of the negative particle in these two sentences has led Bimal Krishna Matilal to distinguish *paryudāsa* and *prasajya-pratiṣedha* as "nominally bound negation" and "verbally bound negation" (Matilal 1971).

not arise from a no-cause, because there is no inference to prove that they arise from such a thing, and because [such arising] is contradicted by inference.⁸

The sub-commentator Avalokitavratā helps clarify some of the ambiguities of this passage, starting with the expression “no-wife.” Avalokitavratā explains that a bad or faulty (Tib. *skyon chags pa* / Skt. *duṣṭa*) wife may exist (*dnegos por gyur pa yod kyang*), but she might as well be called no-wife because she does not do what a wife should do.⁹ The same is true of a no-cause. A so-called no-cause may exist, but it does not act as a cause (*rgyu'i bya ba mi byed pas*), so it might as well be called a “no-cause.”¹⁰ What is included in the category of no-cause? Bhāviveka mentions several possibilities, and Avalokitavratā adds several more, including Brahmā, Prajāpati, Manu, fate (*gnam gyis bsgos pa* / *daiva*), Druvāna (?) of the Persians, and Yuna (?) of the barbarians (*bar bar rnams kyi yu na*).¹¹ Each of these options presents intriguing possibilities. The category of intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*), for example, is attributed to the Materialists or Lokāyatas who follow a figure named Mahārṣi

⁸ *yang na rgyu med ces bya ba ni rgyu ngan pa ste / chung ma med pa zhes bya ba la sogs pa bzhin no // rgyu ngan pa gang zhes na / ngo bo nyid dang / dbang phyug dang / skyes bu dang / gtso bo dang / dus dang / sred med kyi bu la sogs pa ste / yang dag pa ma yin pa'i phyir ro // dnegos po rnams rgyu med pa de las skye ba med de / de las skye bar ston pa'i rjes su dpag pa med pa'i phyir dang / rjes su dpag pa'i gnod par 'gyur ba'i phyir yang ngo zhes bya bar dgongs so //* (Derge, Tsha 50b/7 - 51a/1).

⁹ In his commentary on this passage, Avalokitavratā adds the comparison of a bad or faulty (*skyon chags* / *duṣṭa*) son who fails to do what a son should do: *dper na chung ma ngan pa skyon chags pa dnegos por gyur pa yod kyang chung ma'i bya ba ni mi byed pas de la chung ma med zhes bya ba dang / bu ngan pa skyon chags pa dnegos por gyur pa yod kyang bu'i bya ba mi byed pas de la bu med pa zhes bya ba bzhin du /* (Derge, Wa 114a/1-3). Vasubandhu uses the same comparison in the *bhāṣya* on *Abhidharmakośa* 3.29b to explain the meaning of the term “ignorance” (*avidyā*): “Ignorance (or no-knowledge) is another *dharma*, in the same way that a bad wife is called ‘no-wife’ and a bad son ‘no-son.’ Ignorance also is like this” (*dharmāntaram evāvidyā / yathā tarhi kubhāryā abhāryety ucyate kuputraś cāputraḥ / evam avidyā 'py astu*). The point here is that ignorance (or no-knowledge) and knowledge constitute distinct and separate phenomena.

¹⁰ Derge, Wa 114a/3-4.

¹¹ This passage is discussed in Leonard W. J. van der Kuijp 2006, 169–202. van der Kuijp points out (190) that similar lists of five alleged causes appear in three other places in the *Tarkajvālā*: *īśvara*, *puruṣa*, *pradhāna*, *kāla*, and *Nārayaṇa* (*MHK* 3.137-8); *īśvara*, *puruṣa*, *pradhāna*, atoms (*aṇu*), and *Viṣṇu* (*MHK* 3.223); *Keśava* (*sred med*), *īśa* (*Śiva*), *puruṣa*, *pradhāna*, and atoms (*MHK* 3.248). Verse 50 of the *Suhrillekha*, which is attributed to Nāgārjuna, says that the *skandhas* are created by *avidyā*, etc., not by any other causes, such as *īśvara* (*dbang phyug*), *puruṣa* (*skyes bu*), both (*gnyi ga*), *kāla* (*dus*), *prakṛti* (*rang bzhin*), *niyati* (*nges pa*), *vikṛti* / *vikāra* (*'gyur ba = parīṇāma*), etc. See Lindtner 1982, 222. The *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* on verse 2.64d (“and not from *īśvara* and so forth because there is succession and so forth”) expands the phrase “*īśvara* and so forth” to include *īśvara*, *puruṣa*, *pradhāna*, and so forth. While the elements of these lists seem largely conventional, it is worth noting that Bhāviveka goes out of his way to include various designations of *Viṣṇu* in addition to *īśvara* (apparently associating *īśvara* with *Śiva*, as in the quotation from the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* that follows this passage in the *Prajñāpradīpa*). Why Bhāviveka would have a particular interest in *Viṣṇu* is not immediately obvious, but it is worth noting that his account of the Buddha's Form Body in *MHK* 3.256-7 describes the central rainbow-like figure as adorned with splendor (*śrī*) and glory (*lakṣmī*) consisting of the various characteristics of the Buddha.

*Lokacakṣuḥ (*drang srong chen po'i 'jig rten mig*),¹² and seems to correspond to the idea that certain things, like the color and shape of a lotus plant or the iridescent feathers of a peacock, develop by a process of natural evolution from the plant or animal itself.¹³ But it is impossible in this short space to give each of these options the attention it deserves. In this paper I would like to focus simply on Bhāviveka's criticism of the concept of *īśvara* or Lord,¹⁴ in part because it has wider philosophical significance and in part because it has deeper resonances in Bhāviveka's other works.

13.3 The Lord as No-Cause

Bhāviveka introduces his critique of the concept of *īśvara* or Lord with two quotations from Brahmanical literature. The first comes from chapter four of the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*:

He is subtle, one, and dwells as the source of creation; he creates and destroys the world; he is the Lord who grants wishes and the God who is to be worshipped; he is the creator of good qualities and attains eternal peace.¹⁵

This verse is part of a longer passage of praise to Rudra as the Lord (*īśāna*) who is hidden in all beings and is the source and origin of the gods. Bhāviveka's second quotation comes from *Mahābhārata* 3.31.27:

¹² Derge, Wa 115a/5-6.

¹³ An example of this position appears in the *Buddhacarita* (*Acts of the Buddha*) by Aśvaghōṣa. In the discussion between the royal counselor (*mantradhara*) and prince Siddhārtha in *Buddhacarita* 9.58-64, the counselor argues that human effort is useless when the evolution of the world is driven by inherent nature (*svabhāva*), the Lord (*īśvara*) or the self (*ātman*). He then offers a useful illustration of the function of inherent nature: "That entering the womb, it develops hands, feet, abdomen, back, and head; That his soul then is united with it—all this, experts in these matters explain, is just the work of inherent nature. Who produces the sharpness of a thorn? Or the diversity of beasts and birds? All this happens through inherent nature; there is no role here for willful action, how much less for any human effort" (*Buddhacarita* 9.61-2, trans. Olivelle).

¹⁴ The word *īśvara* is often translated as "God" rather than "Lord" to stress similarities with arguments in the Western tradition about the existence and character of God. A more circumspect option would be to follow Parimal G. Patil's example and refer to it as "a God-like being called 'īśvara'" (Patil 2009, 3).

¹⁵ *gan zhig phrar gyur gcig pu skye gnas 'dug ll de yis 'di kun skye zhing 'jig par byed ll de ni dbang dag* (read *bdag* with Avalokitavratā) *mchog sbyin lha mchod bya ll yon tan byed pa shin tu zhi ba thob ll* (Derge, Wa 51a/7-51b/1). Kajiyama (1963, 56) first identified this verse as a variant of *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 4.11: *yo yoniṃ yoniṃ adhiṣṭhaty eko yasminn idaṃ saṃ ca vi caiti sarvaṃ | tam īśaṇaṃ varadaṃ devam īḍyaṃ nicāyyemāṃ śāntim atyantam eti ll* (Hauschild 1927). Ames (1993, 247) notes that the same verse is quoted in the commentary on *MHK* 8.16 in a version that is closer to the Sanskrit. In his subcommentary on this verse, Avalokitavratā explains that it attributes four distinctive features (*khyad par l viśeṣa*) to the Lord: he is subtle (*phra mo*), one (*gcig pu*), dwells as the source (*skye gnas 'dug*), and creates and destroys the world (*de yis 'di kun skye zhing 'jig par byed*) (Derge, Wa 122a/6-112b/3).

Human beings are ignorant: they do not control their own pleasure or pain;
impelled by the Lord, they may go to heaven or hell.¹⁶

These words are spoken by Draupadī in a passage where she implores her husband Yudhiṣṭhira to avenge the injustice wrought on their Pāṇḍava relatives by their evil cousin Duryodhana. Yudhiṣṭhira responds by saying that, even in the most difficult times, he chooses to act with patience and justice. Draupadī then expresses her anger about Yudhiṣṭhira's loss to Duryodhana in the crooked dice game that led to the catastrophe of the Mahābhārata war. Draupadī explains,

You were upright, gentle, bountiful, modest, and truthful—how could the spirit of gambling swoop down on you? My mind has become utterly bewildered and burns with grief as I see this sorrow of yours and this great distress. On this they quote the old story, how people are in the power of the Lord and have none of their own (van Buitenen 1975, 280).

Bhāṇiveka seizes on this passage as an example of the seemingly arbitrary power that the Lord exercises over the course of human life.

Bhāṇiveka begins his argument against the concept of *īśvara* by formulating an inference from the point of view of conventional truth: “The Lord cannot be the cause of the arising of the world even conventionally (Tib. *kun rdzob tu yang* / Skt. *saṃvṛtyāpi*), because he causes pleasure for some and pain for others, like a cowherd.”¹⁷ As is often the case in Bhāṇiveka's inferences, he presumes the conventional existence of the subject of the inference. In this case the subject is the Lord. Then he attacks his opponent's idea of what the Lord can do. It may seem odd that he does not bother to question the Lord's existence; his argument only attacks the Lord's ability to function as a cause. But it is important to remember that Bhāṇiveka does not interpret Nāgārjuna's “no-cause” as a non-existent cause; it is only a no-cause in the sense that it does not function as a cause. Bhāṇiveka is willing to grant that something called “Lord” might exist conventionally, but he argues that it cannot carry out the activity attributed to it by the opponent.

The reason Bhāṇiveka gives for his assertion also may seem strange: “the Lord cannot cause the arising of the world, because he causes pleasure for some and pain for others.” But with Draupadī's appeal to Yudhiṣṭhira in mind, it is not as strange as it seems. Draupadī is making an emotional plea about the justice of the Lord. In other words, she is raising what we would call the problem of theodicy. She sees Yudhiṣṭhira as the embodiment of warrior virtues—upright, gentle, bountiful, modest, and truthful. He is the prince of Dharma, and yet he was driven to defeat in a dice game by the capriciousness of the Lord. Surely, a Lord who cares about Dharma would not be guilty of such cruel behavior. Whether Draupadī's view of Dharma corresponds to the perspective of the *Mahābhārata* as a whole (if it can be said to

¹⁶ *ajñō jantur anīśo 'yam ātmanah sukhaduḥkhaḥ / īśvaraprerito gacchet svargaṃ vā śvabhram eva vā* // . Translation is adapted from van Buitenen 1975, 281.

¹⁷ *dbang phyug kun rdzob tu yang 'gro ba mtha' dag skye ba'i rgyu yin par mi rung ste / la la'i dga' ba dang / yongs su gdung ba'i rgyu yin pa'i phyir dper na ba lang 'dzi bzhin no* // (Derge, Tsha 51b/2).

have a single perspective), her words certainly convey a visceral feeling of injustice about Duryodhana's victory.

Bhāviveka will develop this initial insight about the character of the Lord much more fully in the ninth chapter of the *Verses on the Heart of the Middle Way* (*Madhyamakahrdayakārikāḥ*) and its commentary, but we can already see the direction in which his argument might develop: if the Lord has the capricious, and perhaps even immoral, character that is attributed to him in Hindu tradition, how can he be the source of a world in which there is a sense of justice and order?

Bhāviveka's second argument poses a similar interpretive challenge: "The world certainly does not possess a single creator called the 'Lord,' because it is an object of cognition (*prameya*), like the Lord himself. For this reason, there is nothing that arises from [the Lord]."¹⁸ Why would the fact that the world is an object of cognition exclude the possibility that it could be created by something called "Lord"? Avalokitavrata offers some help by focusing on the meaning of the example "like the Lord himself." He quotes a passage from an opponent's tradition (Tib. *lung* / Skt. *āgama*) that states "when the mind is concentrated (Tib. *mnyam par bzhas* / Skt. *samāhita*) on the Lord, he can be known (*prameya*) by yogis who practice meditation (Tib. *rnal 'byor goms par byas pa rnams kyi gzhal bya yin no*)." Avalokitavrata then adds that "in our texts (*gzhung*) also an object can be known (*prameya*) conventionally by the word 'Lord.'"¹⁹ I take this to mean that the reason, "because it can be known," is intended simply to establish a commonality between the world and the Lord. Knowability is a property that both the world and the Lord share, and it can be used to argue that both share another important property as well: neither of them was created by the Lord. (Unless, of course, the Lord created himself.) In an actual debate, this might not be the end of the argument. The opponent could come back and argue that the creation of the world is fundamentally different from the origin of the Lord. But it is at least the beginning of an argument, and that may be all that Bhāviveka is trying to accomplish at this stage in the text.

The next step is predictable and does not need to detain us. After arguing from a conventional perspective that the Lord could not have created the world, he shifts to the perspective of the ultimate:

Even if the Lord were the cause, the result must be either [the Lord] himself, different, or both. No matter which option is chosen, the refutation has already been stated, and the arising of something that already exists or does not exist also has been refuted. Therefore there ultimately is nothing that arises from the Lord.²⁰

This argument simply refers the reader back to arguments that have already been stated in the commentary on arising from self, from other and from both. These

¹⁸ 'gro ba ni rgyu byed pa po dbang phyug ces bya ba gcig pu dang ldan pa ma yin par nges te / gzhal bya yin pa'i phyir dper na dbang phyug bzhin pas kun rdzob tu yang dngos po rnams de las skye ba med do // (Derge, Tsha 51b/ 2-3).

¹⁹ Derge, Wa 125b/2.

²⁰ Derge, Tsha 51b/3-4.

arguments are central to the chapter and deserve proper attention, but they are not as surprising as Bhāviveka's conventional approach to the concept of Lord.

13.4 Karma as the Creator of the World

Before leaving the concept of Lord for good, Bhāviveka gives us a new interpretation of what it might mean for something called "Lord" to create the world in a conventional sense:

Someone may think that karma, which is the cause of the multifaceted world of sentient beings along with their physical environment, is called "Lord," because it produces continuation, arising, and destruction, pleasure and pain, and increase and decrease. If this is intended conventionally, it asserts something that we already accept. If it is intended ultimately, it is not the case, because we do not accept that karma arises ultimately.²¹

This argument can be read as a development of Bhāviveka's earlier argument that "the world does not possess a single creator called the 'Lord.'" Bhāviveka is asking what would happen if the opponents were willing to give up the idea of a single creator and apply the word "Lord" in a secondary or a metaphorical sense to the multiplicity of causes lumped together under the word "karma." This would involve a radical reinterpretation of the doctrine of God in the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, the source of Bhāviveka's first quotation. As Patrick Olivelle has aptly noted, "the major aim of the author [of the *Svetāśvatara*] is to establish that the God who creates and from whom one expects salvation is *one*" (Olivelle 1996, 252). But Bhāviveka's proposal also responds to the problem that lay behind the reason in Bhāviveka's first inference, "because he causes pleasure for some and pain for others."

In his classic account of theodicy, salvation, and rebirth, Max Weber argues that "the most complete formal solution to the problem of theodicy is the special achievement of the Indian doctrine of karma, the so-called belief in the transmigration of souls." According to this doctrine, as Max Weber understood it, "the world is viewed as a completely connected and self-contained cosmos of ethical retribution" (Weber

²¹ Derge, Tsha 51b/4-5. By making this proposal, Bhāviveka places himself in a venerable Buddhist tradition about the creative function of karma. For example, we read in *Abhidharmakośa* 4.1 that "the diversity of the world is born from karma" (*karmajaṃ lokavaicitryam*). The *bhāṣya* that introduces this verse speaks of "the multifaceted diversity of sentient beings along with their physical environment (*sattvabhājanalokasya bahudhā vaicitryam*)."²² For an account of the evolution of this argument in later Buddhist literature, see Steinkellner 2006. A thorough study of the argument against *īśvara* in later Buddhist logic can be found in Patil 2009. In Ratnakīrti the focus shifts from the unity of *īśvara* to *īśvara*'s "intelligence," but Ratnakīrti makes a similar move with regard to karma. He is willing to accept that the world has an intelligent (or "intelligence possessing" *buddhimat*) maker, but insists that it constitutes mental construction, exclusion, and determination (the constituents of karma) rather than the Naiyāyikas' *īśvara*. Patil explains: "In this he supports the long-standing Buddhist commitment to there being a conscious maker of our world, while also showing that such a maker need not be the single, permanent, omniscient maker whose existence his Naiyāyikas have worked so hard to establish" (Patil 2009, 309–310).

1993,145). Weber's analysis is certainly true in the particular case Bhāvivēka cites from the *Mahābhārata*. The justice of the Lord would cease to be an issue if the pleasure and pain of its central characters were understood not as the capricious and mysterious whims of a divine agent, but as the result of a person's own karma. While Draupadī might not be satisfied with this response, it would have the virtue of shifting the blame for Yudhiṣṭhira's loss from the Lord to Yudhiṣṭhira himself. It would also open the door to a much deeper consideration of the ambiguities and ironies involved in the problem of moral responsibility in the epic. In many ways the protagonists of the story are indeed "unknowing" (*ajñā*) and driven by the whims of the Lord, as Draupadī says, but this does not seem to free them from responsibility. How to bear this responsibility in the face of uncertainty is one of the fundamental issues of the text.

Bhāvivēka's observations about karma also open the door to a deeper consideration of his approach to the categories of conventional reality more generally. It is not uncommon for him to carry out a critical investigation of an opponent's position and then end his argument by offering a way to accept the opponent's categorization by viewing it from a conventional perspective. He does this in a particularly striking way in his critique of the Yogācāra denial of external objects.²² The target of this critique is the position of Dignāga, as expressed in *The Investigation of the Percept*.²³ Bhāvivēka does not accept the existence of external objects ultimately, but he is willing to accept them conventionally. This strategy of denying certain categories ultimately but accepting them conventionally was put to good use by Madhyamaka commentators in the eighth century, including Jñānagarbha, Śāntarakṣita, and Kamalaśīla. So, in a sense, Bhāvivēka is making a serious philosophical proposal: If you are looking for a fundamental cause for the diversity of the world, there is no need to look any farther than the concept of karma. And if it fits your theological predilections, you can feel free to call this by the name "Lord."

Bhāvivēka would not quibble about the words. But it would not be wrong also to detect a sense of irony in his proposal. This is not just a shift of terminology. He is asking the opponent to abandon his commitment to a single, divine creator and replace it with a pluralistic, impersonal concept of karma. In effect Bhāvivēka is asking his Brahmanical opponent to abandon the concept of God and become a Buddhist.

13.5 Chapter 3 of the *Verses on the Heart of the Middle Way*

When we move from Bhāvivēka's commentary on Nāgārjuna's verses to Bhāvivēka's own *Verses on the Heart of the Middle Way* (*Madhyamakahrdayakārikāḥ*, abbreviated *MHK*), the argument becomes more complex. In effect, there are gains and

²² See Eckel 2015 and the discussion of *Tarkajvālā* chapter five in Eckel 2008.

²³ For a discussion of this text with its commentaries, see Powers 2016.

losses. In chapter three of the *MHK*, Bhāviveka starts by treating the concept of *īśvara* as he did in the commentary on *MMK* 1.1, where he includes it as part of the discussion of arising from no-cause. He also starts with the same quotation from the *Mahābhārata*. But his first inference lacks the clarity of his first inference in the *Prajñāpradīpa*. Instead of saying, “The Lord cannot cause the arising of the world, because he causes pleasure for some and pain for others, like a cowherd,” as he did in the *Prajñāpradīpa*, his first verse literally reads, “The world does not have a Lord as its creator, because [he] is the cause of someone’s pleasure, just as a Lord who causes pleasure does not create the Lord.”²⁴ The problem here is that the inferring property (*sādhana-dharma*), “because he is the cause of someone’s pleasure” (*kasyacit prītihetutvāt*) does not belong to the world, which is the actual subject of the inference; it belongs to the Lord. The Tibetan translators, Atiśa (also known as Dīpaṃkaraśrījñāna) and Tshul khriṃs rgyal ba, tried to solve this problem by making the Lord the subject of the inference: “The Lord does not create the world, because he is the cause of someone’s pleasure, just as a Lord who causes pleasure does not create the Lord.”²⁵ But this simply shifts the problem from the reason to the example, producing an inference that says: “the Lord is not just like the Lord.” The example should be something that shares the properties of the Lord, not the Lord himself.

As it stands, the Sanskrit version of this particular verse seems to be an awkward combination of Bhāviveka’s two inferences in the *Prajñāpradīpa*, where the first inference treated the Lord as its subject, pleasure and pain as its reason, and a cowherd as its example. The second inference had the world as its subject, “because it is an object of cognition” as its reason, and the Lord himself as its example. Here the thesis (*pratijñā*) and example (*dṛṣṭānta*) come from the second inference and the reason (*hetu*) from the first. It is possible that the incongruity in this verse may be an indication of deeper problems in its textual transmission as a whole. Perhaps the verse became defective at an early stage in the development of the text, and the translators attempted to fix the problem by changing the subject of the thesis. But without knowing the passage from the *Prajñāpradīpa*, it would have been difficult to understand this inference.

The situation improves, however, as the argument develops. In his commentary on Nāgārjuna’s verses, Bhāviveka offered the possibility that the word “Lord” might simply refer to the karma that causes the diversity of the world. He offers the same possibility here, but in this case he presents an actual argument and, in the process, elicits a clever response. He begins by saying: “There is not a single Lord, because he produces a combination of things.”²⁶ The opponent (as imagined by Bhāviveka) then suggests that the Lord is like a king who oversees a large group of servants. Different servants produce different results, but they act under the direction of a

²⁴ *kasyacit prītihetutvāl loko neśvarakarṭṛkaḥ / vidadhāno yathā prītiṃ neśa īśvarakarṭṛkaḥ* // (*MHK* 3.215). All quotations from chapters 1–3 of the *MHK* are taken from Heitmann 1998.

²⁵ *dbang phyug 'jig rten byed po min // la la 'i dga' ba 'i rgyu yin phyir // dper na dbang phyug dga' byed pa 'i // byed po dbang phyug ma yin bzhiṃ* // (Derge, Tsha 110a/4–5).

²⁶ *sāmagryā bhāvanirvṛtteḥ kaścinn eko 'sti neśvaraḥ* // (*MHK* 3.218ab).

single Lord: “Someone may think that the sense organs have a Lord, because they are many, like servants.”²⁷ Bhāviveka then translates this proposal into a classic example of the argument from design: “Or if someone thinks that [the sense organs] have a creator, because they are designed (or arranged), like a pot, then, if the creator is not specified, this proves something that we already accept.”²⁸ Here Bhāviveka points to a weakness in the opponent’s argument that is not unlike the weakness noted by the character Philo in David Hume’s classic analysis of the argument from design in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. The character Cleanthes begins his argument by comparing the universe to an immensely complex machine: “Look round the world: Contemplate the whole and every part of it: You will find it to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines, which again admit of subdivisions, to a degree beyond what human senses and faculties can trace and explain” (Hume 2007, 19). Philo argues that there is no particular reason to privilege the comparison between the universe and a machine. Why not think of it by analogy with the growth of an animal or a plant? Philo explains as follows:

If the universe bears a greater likeness to animal bodies and to vegetables, than to the works of human art, it is more probable, that its cause resembles the cause of the former than that of the latter, and its origin ought rather to be ascribed to generation or vegetation than to reason or design (Hume 2007, 52).

Philo even offers an Indian example. Why not assert, as the Brahmins do, that “the world arose from an infinite spider, who spun this whole complicated mass from his bowels” (Hume 2007, 52).

There is an element of playful irony in Philo’s arguments, but they have a serious intent. The same is true of Bhāviveka’s critique of his opponent’s analogy of the Lord to a maker of pots. Even if we acknowledge that the world might have a first cause, why does this cause have to be a Lord as imagined by the opponent? Why not specify it as something else altogether? By raising this possibility, Bhāviveka brings his argument to a conclusion: “If you specify that [the creator] is eternal, one, and subtle, there is no example. And your [Lord] suffers the fault of being impermanent, having a form (body), and being born.”²⁹ All these problems can be avoided if you choose the Buddhist option and attribute causation to karma: “If karma is the Lord, [namely, the karma] that causes the diversity of the world consisting of sentient beings and their environment, this asserts something that we already accept conventionally.”³⁰

²⁷ *seśvaraṃ cakṣurādīṣṭaṃ bahutvād yadi dāsavat* // (MHK 3.219ab).

²⁸ *sakartṛkaṃ athābhīṣṭaṃ racitatvād ghaṭādivat / anirdiṣṭaviśeṣeṇa kartā cet siddhasādhanaṃ* // (MHK 3.220).

²⁹ *atha nityaikasūkṣmādiviśeṣeṇa na te 'nvayaḥ / anityamūrtajātatvadoṣāpattiś ca tasya vaḥ* // (MHK 3.221).

³⁰ *sattvabhājanasaṃkhyātālokavaicitryakāraṇaṃ / karmeśvaraś cet saṃvṛtyā siddham eva prasādhyaṭe* // (MHK 3.222).

13.6 Chapter 9 of the *Verses on the Heart of the Middle Way*

While it obscures some points and expands on others, the account of the Lord in *MHK* 3 still adheres closely to the pattern laid down in the commentary on *MMK* 1.1. The same cannot be said, however, for the argument in *MHK* 9, where Bhāviveka shifts his attention to a tradition that he identifies as Mīmāṃsā.³¹ Here the key issue is not whether it is possible for the Lord to create the world, but whether the Lord as traditionally conceived can be trusted to be the creator of the Veda. Bhāviveka gives a clear indication of the direction of his critique in verse 9.59: “It is reasonable for someone to reject the Veda when he sees the defiled behavior of its authors: Brahmā, Viṣṇu (*keśava*), and Śiva (*sūlin*).”³² In his 2016 dissertation, Hyoung Seok Ham has shown how Bhāviveka's chapter on the Mīmāṃsā adopts and builds on a traditional Buddhist critique of Vedic authority. This is certainly true, but the chapter also can be read as an expansive discussion of the same divine inadequacies that were alluded to by Draupadī in the *Mahābhārata*. The Epics and Purāṇas give Bhāviveka rich sources for his argument.

The key to the initial engagement with the concept of “Lord” has to do with knowledge. For the Vedas to be authoritative, according to Bhāviveka, their teacher (or teachers) would have to know the truth, but those who know the truth would never engage in the corrupt and defiled behavior that is commonly attributed to Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva. Bhāviveka develops this point in verses 9.60–61:

Someone who has knowledge burns sin with knowledge just as fire burns fuel; because of his special brilliance, he does not go astray. Someone who has knowledge understands that knowledge can burn defilements; he does not commit sin, because there is no reason for it.³³

The connection between knowledge and sin is made even more explicit in verse 9.65: “If the Lord kills brahmins, drinks alcohol, has desire, and still sees the truth, why don't those who follow the same path also see the truth?”³⁴

A Lord who acts in such a defiled way would also lack another crucial feature associated with the concept of Lord: he could not be the protector of Dharma. Bhāviveka makes this point in 9.69 by focusing particularly on the figure of Kṛṣṇa: “If [Hari] wants to protect Dharma, why not stop taking other men's women and

³¹ The question of how far the contents of this chapter correspond to the historical tradition of the Mīmāṃsā has been much discussed. For a summary of the issues, see Ham 2016.

³² *trayīmārga-praṇetrṇām brahmakeśavaśūlinām / drṣtvā kleśātmikāṃ caryāṃ yuktāṃ yat tyajate trayī //* The Sanskrit text of *MHK* chapter nine is quoted from the edition by Lindtner 2001. The translation is mine. I will adhere, however, to the commonly accepted numbering in the edition of Kawasaki 1976–88.

³³ *jñānena jñāninaḥ pāpaṃ dahaty agnir ivendhanam / atas tejovīṣeṣāc ca na teṣāṃ pratyavāyitā //* *yat kleśadahanāyālaṃ tajjñānaṃ jñānino viduḥ / nātaḥ prakurute pāpaṃ jñānī taddhetutvasaṃbhavāt //*

³⁴ *brahmahā madyapah kāmī drṣṭatattvo yadīśvaraḥ / kā kathādrṣṭatattvānām tatpaddhatyanugāminām //*

property, deceiving, and lying?”³⁵ Here Bhāviveka makes explicit an assumption that lay behind Draupadī’s protest in the *Mahābhārata*: surely a Lord who protects Dharma would not have treated the righteous Yudhiṣṭhira in such a capricious and cruel way.³⁶ But here he adds a reference to the more complex figure of Kṛṣṇa in later Indian mythology: not only the righteous figure of the *Mahābhārata* but the figure of the playful cowherd who seduces other men’s wives.

All of these verses function as a part of Bhāviveka’s argument against the authority of the Vedas. He argues that the Lord depicted in Hindu mythology lacks the character to function as the author of such an authoritative text. But in verse 9.95, he returns to the topic of the Lord as creator, and in the process gives the argument a surprising turn: “I said earlier that the universe cannot have a cause such as the Lord; even if there were a creator such as the Lord, what could he create?”³⁷ Bhāviveka then goes through a list of the possible products of creation and argues that none could have been created by a Lord as traditionally conceived, namely a Lord who is one, eternal, conscious, and subtle. First (in verse 9.96), he says that the self (*ātman*) cannot be his creation, because it is not born (*ajanyatvāt*). The same is true of righteousness and unrighteousness (*dharma* and *adharma*), because these are qualities of the Lord himself. He cannot produce the body, because it is produced by righteousness and unrighteous in order to experience pleasure and pain. If the Lord had become Lord because of his previous karma, he would no longer be Lord, but if he had become Lord for no cause at all, he also would not be Lord. If the Lord were nothing but consciousness and created the world, then the world too would be nothing but consciousness. If the Lord were subtle (*aṇima*), then the world would be subtle, but because the world is not subtle, its cause cannot be the Lord. If the Lord were the creator of karma, then he would boil in hell. If the Lord created karma, and the Lord is eternal (*nitya*), then karma would also be eternal. If the Lord were one and not many, how could he have many effects? Some of these arguments may have more force than others, but they give an indication of the way Bhāviveka’s mind works. The most common principle is simply that like produces like. If the Lord has a particular characteristic, that characteristic must also be shared by his creation.

This point can also be turned around: if the created world has a certain characteristic, then that characteristic must be attributable to the Lord who created it. This approach could be read as a variant of the argument about theodicy, although it more often is presented simply as an ironic commentary on the nature of the Lord himself.

³⁵ *parastrīdraviṇādāna-māyāśāthyapravṛttayaḥ / kiṃ na tyaktā hi vāñchāsti tasya ced dharma-guptaye //*.

³⁶ A key passage on this point is *Bhagavad Gītā* 4.7-8: “Whenever righteousness declines and unrighteousness increases, O Bhārata, I create myself. To protect those who do good, destroy those who do evil, and maintain Dharma, I come into being from age to age” (*yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānir bhavati bhārata / abhyutthānam adharmasya tadātmānam sṛjāmy aham //* *paritrāṇāya sādhnūnam vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām / dharmasaṁsthāpanārthāya saṁbhavāmi yuge yuge //*).

³⁷ *neśādikāraṇaṃ viśvaṃ yuktam ity uditam purā / saty apīśādikartṛtve kiṃ hi tat kṛtakaṃ bhavet //*.

For example, Bhāviveka addresses the following verses to Śiva as Rudra, the “terrifying” one, who is said to be the Lord of creation in the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*:

Homage to Rudra, who is appropriately named. He takes pleasure in animals who are in constant fear of being eaten by one another, in the inhabitants of hell who suffer by being crushed, sliced, roasted, and so forth, and in humans who are tormented by birth, death, sickness, fear, grief, and weakness.³⁸

Bhāviveka even comments ironically on the differences between the fate of Buddhists and the fate of those who are devoted to the Lord, before returning to a point about karma as the source of the world's diversity:

Why are some Buddhists happy while his [i.e. Śiva's] devotees suffer? Why don't fortunate people commit sin at the Lord's command? Someone who does not understand the diversity of karma, should be told that this [karma] is its cause. This is the way to refute [the view] that Brahman and Kṛṣṇa are agents of creation.³⁹

Many of the details of the argument in this section of Bhāviveka's text still remain to be examined further, to say nothing of the complex web of references and associations in the commentary that tie Bhāviveka to the Upaniṣads, Epics, and Purāṇas. But I hope that this brief glimpse of Bhāviveka's arguments about the concept of Lord shows some of the imagination and eloquence that characterize Bhāviveka's controversial relationship with Brahmanical tradition. I hope also that it demonstrates some of the philosophical complexity that Bhāviveka found waiting to be explored in Nāgārjuna's seemingly formulaic and innocuous reference to the possibility of causation from something as simple as no-cause.

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³⁸ *anyānya-bhaksanād bhūtais tiryagbhir durlabhotsavaiḥ / niṣpeṣacchedadāhādīduḥkhārtair nārakair api // nṛbhir janmajarārogaabhaya-śokaklamārditaiḥ / prīyate yo namas tasmai rudrāyānvarthasaṃjñine* // (MHK 9.108-9).

³⁹ *bauddhā hi sukhinaḥ kecit (tad)bhaktā duḥkhinaś ca kim // iśvarājñāvidhānāc ca puṇyabhāk kiṃ na pāpakṛt // vaicitryakarmaṇo 'jñasya taddhetutvena vācyatā / etena sṛṣṭikartṛtvaṃ pratyuktaṃ brahmakṛṣṇayoḥ* // (MHK 9.112-13).

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Chapter 14

On the Past and Future of Religion, Art and Philosophy



C. Allen Speight

Abstract Recent critics have argued that the concept of “religion” is an essentially modern development, claiming that no ancient language has terms that adequately correspond to our sense of the words “religion” and “religious.” But the short history claimed for “religion” as a concept is not an isolated phenomenon: the situation in religious studies may, for example, be interestingly compared to that within the study of the parallel humanities disciplines of art history and aesthetics, where critics have made a similar case about the lack of any corresponding ancient notion of “art.” If both religion and art have such brief conceptual histories, what should change about the way scholars in these traditional humanities disciplines approach phenomena that exist in the much longer pre-history relevant to both fields? And what changes for the “afterlife” of both conceptions with this new historical self-awareness? This chapter examines the shifts in these fields and the future role philosophy should play vis-à-vis art and religion if these reconstructions of the development of the concepts of art and religion are correct.

Keywords Concept of religion · Aesthetics · Art · Philosophy · Methodology

To ask about the *future* of the philosophy of religion immediately prompts a question about what its *past* may be taken to be. That history, in the eyes of some scholars, would appear to be relatively short—or a good deal shorter than is often assumed. As Brent Nongbri has recently argued, the very term “religion” appears as a quite late development within the last 200 years or so of Western culture (Nongbri 2013, 2). No ancient language, he claims, has a term that adequately corresponds to the contemporary senses of our words “religion” and “religious”; moreover, even certain identifying terms for major religions themselves can be seen to be of recent date (Nongbri 2013, 3; Cavanaugh 2009).

But the short history of “religion” as a concept is not an isolated phenomenon. A similar argument to Nongbri’s has long been made within the parallel humanities

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disciplines of art history and aesthetics: in an influential pair of articles written almost seven decades ago, the intellectual historian Paul Oskar Kristeller argued that the notion of “art” in our contemporary sense emerged only in the eighteenth century (Kristeller 1951, 1952). Subsequent work by philosophers of art like Arthur Danto (Danto 1998) and Dominic McIver Lopes (Lopes 2014) have acknowledged the importance of Kristeller’s argument for coming to terms with the contemporary situation of art, and art historians like Hans Belting meanwhile have undertaken the exploration of art prior to the emergence of the modern notion of it—before, as Belting puts it, we have a notion of “art as invented by a famous artist and defined by a proper theory” (Belting 1994, xii).

While there are important disciplinary differences in the accounts of the emergence of the two modern notions of religion and art, an examination of these two narratives together may nonetheless prompt some interesting questions about their common origins and common difficulties—questions for which philosophy traditionally has attempted to offer some theoretical ground. For its part, philosophy may also be in need of historical self-examination in this regard. While it is often thought that there must be an ancient origin for certain well-known philosophical formulations of the relation of art and religion in a broader theoretical context—for example, the supposed “triad” of the “good, true and beautiful” as related value terms—a more careful genealogy of these formulations suggests the need for care. Although the neo-Platonic and Christian traditions took up a concern with the relation between divine and human beauty, the emergence of the “triad” of the “good, true and beautiful” in the form familiar to us—perhaps most memorably articulated in Victor Cousin’s canonical post-Kantian book title *Du Vrai, Du Beau et Du Bien* (Cousin 1853)—appears to be a distinctively modern story, as John Levi Martin and others have argued (Martin 2017; Viladesau 2008).

If the force of the historical arguments about the origin of the terms religion and art is granted, what follows for work within the relevant fields of religious studies and art history—as well as for the philosophy of religion and philosophy of art? There are a number of puzzling questions here. First, with an eye to phenomena that exist *prior* to the emergence of our familiar modern notions: if both art and religion have the sort of brief conceptual history that Nongbri and Kristeller argue for, what should change about the way scholars in these disciplines approach phenomena from the much longer pre-history relevant to both fields? Second, awareness of the conceptual history of religion and art prompts questions about later phenomena, as well: within art history and the philosophy of art, Danto (following Hegel) argued that art in the distinctive modern sense had in fact reached its “end” (not, as many misunderstood him to say, come to a *stop*, but rather teleologically reached the end; Danto 1981, vii). And awareness of the emergence of the conceptual history of the term religion raises similar questions about whether *religion* has a future, as the overall framework of this volume and the contributions within it suggest.

These questions about the relation between the past and future of religion and art are still relatively under-explored within the domains of religious studies and the philosophy of religion, but may offer some particularly useful insights for the future of work in those disciplines. And their pertinence is not merely of historical

relevance but may be of important potential for the systematic concerns of philosophers in areas such as the philosophy of mind and value theory.

In what follows, this chapter will examine first the claims made by Nongbri and Kristeller about the parallel histories of the development of the concepts of religion and art (Sect. 14.1). It will then explore what conclusions might be drawn about the “before” and “after” of the conceptual history of the terms religion and art. In Sect. 14.2, the question is how to approach what we might call “overlapping phenomena” that in some sense are claimable by modern students of *both* religion and art but that emerged “before” those terms became defined in the modern sense. And in Sect. 14.3, with an eye to the “future”-oriented concerns of this volume, the question concerns the “afterward” of the notions of art and religion if we properly consider the parallels they share in common and their relationship to philosophy.

14.1 Parallel Narratives of the Development of Two Concepts

The argument that Nongbri develops is that religion in the sense that *we* mean it—that is to say, in the sense in which religion implies an inherent opposition to a realm that is *non*-religious or secular and that is concerned above all with an individual’s private dispositions as opposed to the public realm—is a distinctly modern innovation. Between the middle of the fifteenth and the middle of the seventeenth centuries, he argues, a series of crucial events occurred—among them the Protestant Reformation and the discovery of cultures, especially in the New World, that had not been previously encountered by Europeans—that gave rise to the notion of religion as we know it.

Such a claim about the notion of religion as a modern construction is, of course, not new. Nongbri discusses Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s attack (1991) on the term religion as a product of reification over history, but argues that Smith himself still “had no doubt that all humans throughout history have been able to ‘be religious’” (Nongbri 2013, 3). Nongbri’s historical account draws more directly both on Talal Asad’s (1993, 2001) notion that religion and secularism are “Siamese twins” that emerge conceptually together in modernity and on Tomoko Masuzawa’s critique of the contemporary notion of “world religions” as emerging from earlier paradigms that put “pagan/heathen/idolatrous” religions in a single category. As Nongbri quotes Masuzawa: what changed from these earlier paradigms “was not so much the method of how to count and categorize religions, but the very manner in which—in an important sense, for the first time—a ‘religion’ was to be recognized, to be identified as such, so that it might be *compared* with another” (Nongbri 2013, 124–5; Masuzawa 2005).

Nongbri’s study traces key shifts in the rise of religion in the formative period of modernity. While contemporary religions explored by early modern thinkers were initially understood as forms of Christian heresies (Islam, Judaism), there were a series of reinventions of ancient practices: thus Greek and Roman religion, which had been understood in earlier times within largely patristic categories (with Greek

and Roman gods being considered as “demons” according to early Christianity) were now re-evaluated in light of the colonizing experience of Europeans in the Americas. “The new peoples Europeans encountered had the effect of making the gods and odd worship practices of classical literature seem more like ‘real options’; Europeans were able to imagine into existence ancient Greeks and Romans acting in ways not unlike these new, contemporary pagans” (Nongbri 2013, 138).

On Nongbri’s view, this means that in modernity there has been a reinvention of sorts of ancient religion on a model which is still employed by contemporary scholars. An interesting case is the contemporary account of “Mesopotamian religion”: although scholars like Jacobsen (1976) and Oppenheim (1950, 1965, 1977) differ in their confidence at comprehending something called Mesopotamian religion, both employ similar modern conceptions in terms of what would *count* as religion—in both cases, Nongbri argues, following Veldhuis, universal features of human feeling that go back to the formulations of Otto and others (Nongbri 2013, 145–6; Otto 1958; Veldhuis 2004). The consequences of making such assumptions in the study of the ancient world can be seen “quite literally,” Nongbri observes, in categories used by museums and archeological expeditions—at the British Museum, for example, cuneiform tablets were regularly sorted into categories “H” for history and “R” for religion (Nongbri 2013, 145), as though these classifications were straightforward and exclusive.

If we turn to the consideration of the development of art as a modern category, it is striking that Kristeller’s argument is similar in many ways to Nongbri’s. Kristeller argues that, even in ancient writing on artistic topics, there is no word that sufficiently corresponds to our modern sense of “art.” The ancient Greek notion of *technē*, for example, embraces a wide set of practices from medicine to shoe-making to painting. And a great deal of our modern sense of art’s connection to the aesthetic—to the stance of the disinterested spectator, for example, as well as the distinction between “fine” art and artisanship—is a recent phenomenon, as well (Shiner 2001).

Kristeller claimed that it was a mid-eighteenth century development that the fine arts as such—in a codified list after Batteux that included the five specific arts architecture, sculpture, painting, music and poetry—came to be explicitly considered as a “system,” distinguished from craft and utilitarian arts on the one hand and from activities with moral purposes on the other. The ancients, he argued, had no such “system,” made no clear distinction between the “beautiful” (*to kalon*) and the “good” (*to agathon*), and produced no general philosophical account of arts such as painting, sculpture and architecture. On Kristeller’s view, “only the eighteenth century produced a type of literature in which the various arts were compared with each other and discussed on the basis of common principles, whereas up to that period treatises on poetics and rhetoric, on painting and architecture, and on music had represented quite distinct branches of writing and were primarily concerned with technical principles rather than with general rules.” Kristeller claims that “no ancient philosopher... wrote a separate systematic treatise on the visual arts or assigned to them a prominent place in his scheme of knowledge”; even the organizational scheme in Aristotle’s *Poetics* gives only glancing mention to visual arts, treats music

and dance as forms of poetry and excludes some arts, like architecture, entirely (Kristeller 1951).

The historical narrative that Kristeller traces from the ancient world to the modern “system” of arts emphasizes several important stages in the development of new status for individual arts and artists themselves: in sixteenth century Italy, as the three visual arts (painting, sculpture and architecture) become for the first time clearly separated from the crafts with which they had been linked, and in seventeenth century France, as the French Academies are founded. But the decisive shift, Kristeller argues, comes only in the mid-eighteenth century when the “irreducible nucleus” of the five arts appears first in Batteux and then is taken up with surprising consistency by later writers, and as the German aesthetic tradition develops between Baumgarten and Kant.

The resulting appeal from a notion of the “fine arts” as a defined group to “Art” as such—and then to the well-known post-Kantian philosophical tripartition of the values of the good, the true and the beautiful visible in Cousin’s work and others—thus stand, on Kristeller’s view, as distinctive eighteenth century contributions to the beginning of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline in its own right. By contrast, he claims, “ancient writers and thinkers, though confronted with excellent works of art and quite susceptible to their charm, were neither able nor eager to detach the aesthetic quality of these works from their intellectual, moral, religious and practical function or content” (Kristeller 1951/2).

14.2 Exploring Contemporary Resources for Reconceptualizing the “Before” of Religion and Art

How might the awareness of the “short histories” of religion and art suggested by Nongbri and Kristeller change the philosophical approaches taken to the view of the past of the two fields? Nongbri’s suggested approach to the “past” that is usually associated with religion is one that requires a new attentiveness to a local culture’s references to itself. He offers readings, for example, of the relevant uses of terms like the Latin *religio*, the Greek *thrēskeia* or the Arabic *dīn* and why they should be contextually construed in a way that does not simply translate them in terms of the modern concept of “religion” (Nongbri 2013, 26–45). For his part, Belting (1994, 2003) similarly examines what Byzantine votaries said about artefacts in the context of an “era of images” rather than what we may assume about them based on the later “era of art.” This approach allows scholars of art history to recognize the importance of claims that certain images in fact have the status they do precisely because they were *not* thought to be made by the hands of artists or artisans: in Byzantine culture, for example, it was precisely certain *acheiropoietic* images—literally, those “not made by (human) hand”—which were thought to have privileged status because they had been made either by contact with a saint or even by direct divine help (Belting 1994, 47–77).

What might be gained from methodologically considering these re-contextualizations of early religious or artistic phenomena under a common problematic? One interesting place to begin with this consideration might be with phenomena or artefacts that arguably can be (and indeed have been) claimed by *both* disciplines. One may think here of a fairly wide range of pre-modern phenomena requiring different methodological considerations—from the study of Paleolithic cave art, where there is no linguistic evidence but assessments depend on the contextual work done by archeologists, paleontologists and anthropologists; to classical Greek painting and sculpture, where we have a contemporaneous philosophical account of art (in Plato, Aristotle) but without a comprehensive view of the relevant phenomena (chryselephantine sculpture, vase painting, etc); to Byzantine icons, where the understanding of aesthetics is informed by explicit theological debate; to the productions of Aboriginal artists who in expressing their experience of “Dreamtime” still carry on an oral tradition accessible to the queries of contemporary anthropologists.

It is clear that a number of different methodological considerations come into play in exploring the proto-religious/proto-artistic dimensions of these cases. To take the study of Paleolithic art, for example (a field whose origin dates only to the last decades of the nineteenth century): some of the earliest scholars held a resolutely anti-religious and aesthetic perspective that such work could be considered only as “art for art’s sake”—for example the resiliently anti-clerical French scholar de Mortillet (1898)—while others insisted on an equally isolated view on the religious side that such art could only be construed in terms of its being a part of a ritual associated with hunting magic (Reinach 1903; Bégouën 1929; Breuil 1952).

Although earlier scholarly attempts at making sense of such prehistoric human artefacts thus seemingly made use of a division between supposedly artistic and religious motivations, such a separation is scarcely appealed to by those in the field today. Much current research is focused especially on the connection between the cognitive/neuroscientific on the one hand and the “extended, distributed, embodied and culturally mediated character of the human mind” in symbols, value, religion, literacy, etc on the other hand: “the hallmark of human cognitive evolution may not be based on the ever-increasing sophistication or specialization of a modular mind, but upon an ever increasing representational flexibility that allows for environmentally and culturally derived plastic changes in the structure and functional architecture of the human brain” (Renfrew et al. 2008).

Even within contemporary research, however, the methodological questions relevant for looking at such early artefacts in light of putatively proto-religious or proto-artistic motivations still remain: it may perhaps be surprising, for example, to find that one of the more persistent contemporary views among scholars employing the most sophisticated and rigorous methods of carbon dating, microscopy and laser measurement is one based on a notion of shamanistic practices (Clottes 2008; Lewis-Williams 2002). In this context, something like Nongbri’s caveat that scholars should not rely on the assumption that “religion is simply a fact of human life and always has been” (Nongbri, 254) may remain a pertinent warning of use for contemporary research into the earliest human cultural artefacts. The anthropologist Maurice Bloch has put this in terms of getting at what is “not special” but still “central” in the

questions ordinarily labelled religious: “what differentiates human sociality from that of other primates, i.e. the fact that members of society often act towards each other in terms of essentialized roles and groups. These have a phenomenological existence that is not based on everyday empirical monitoring but on *imagined statuses and communities*, such as clans or nations” (Bloch 2008; emphasis mine). While such statuses are very difficult to recover in the case of Paleolithic art, we can at least draw from the existing evidence a sense of the differing purposes that lie behind such art: i.e., some is clearly for public viewing and some is not (Bahn 2016).

There have been some important methodological suggestions in this direction, notably from the arena of critical theory. Walter Benjamin suggested in his 1930’s discussion of aura and reproducibility, for example, that studies of art needed to take into account a kind of spectrum between *cult value* and *exhibition value* (Benjamin 1968): in some cultural contexts, the emphasis is on participation in ritual (e.g., how icons are used in services, for example), whereas in others the primary concern is with the aesthetic qualities they exhibit (e.g., contemporary hanging of icons in museums). The advantage here is that one does not have to make assumptions about whether something should count as “religion” or “art,” but rather one can look to a number of reflective practices relevant for production of a given artefact. An example: many Paleolithic caves have both artefacts that suggest the context of participatory ritual (e.g., finger flutings or hand imprints that were made by many different men, women and children) and ones that appear meant above all to be *seen* on their own as some kind of aesthetic object (e.g., larger sketches by apparently individual artists of beasts like mammoths and bison that appear on the ceiling of large rooms in Paleolithic caves where a number of people could gather). If we follow Benjamin’s approach to working with the problematic Nongbri and Kristeller/Belting have articulated, we would not classify the former as “religious” and the latter as “artistic,” but see them together as products reflective of a set of wide-ranging cultural practices from the Paleolithic era. (There are a number of important suggestions for resources here in the wider-ranging study of Bellah 2011, which emphasizes the crucial importance of the mimetic in the evolutionary development of religion, even though the specific Paleolithic phenomena in question are not discussed in any detail there.)

The methodological concerns that have motivated the work of Nongbri and Kristeller/Belting, then, prompt not only a rigorous caution about our application of anachronistic categories like “religion” and “art” to such ancient phenomena but also offer the potential for exploring together the practices that lie behind such cultural artefacts.

14.3 Exploring Contemporary Resources for Reconceptualizing the “After” of Religion and Art

If a consideration of the origins of the terms “religion” and “art” leads methodologically to critical restrictions on universalizing assumptions often employed in the exploration of the past by contemporary disciplines like archeology and neuroscience, what of the future? In the case of art, it is striking that all of the scholars

mentioned earlier—Hegel, Kristeller, Danto, Belting—emphasize the need to come to terms with a notion of the *end* of art. This notion is construed in somewhat different ways by each of them, but all of them are clear that what is at issue is not the cessation of artistic activity, but rather that the arrival at the goal or *telos* implied in the very *concept* of art as such is concomitant with the emergence of a new self-consciousness about the relevant activities. Danto made the point perhaps most vividly when he insisted in the wake of Warhol's exhibition at the Stabile gallery in 1964 that art in the future must now be inherently conceptual and self-aware—and hence that to do art is just to be doing the *philosophy* of art itself (Danto 1981, vii).

While it may be difficult to find a signal turning-point within the development of modern religion that has the eventfulness of Danto's characterization of the "Warhol moment," there is nonetheless a similarly important shift to consider when we take up the question of the future of religion and its relation to philosophy. In fact, a similar move to the (purely) conceptual can be detected, as Nongbri quotes Wilfred Cantwell Smith: "the rise of the *concept* 'religion' is in some ways correlated with a decline in the *practice* of religion itself" (Nongbri 2013, 3; emphasis mine).

It may be less clear what the shift in the contemporary notion of religion means, however: although there have been numerous arguments about the "end of religion" in light of the overall secularization narrative associated with the West, many scholars have also pointed to the persistence (even in some contexts the resurgence) of forms of religious identification, as well as (unfortunately) acts of violence at least claimed in the name of religion (see Casanova 1994, 2011). However one construes the large bodies of social scientific evidence about this issue, the philosophical importance of a conceptual shift in how religion is construed is difficult to miss. It is one of the key points of Charles Taylor's landmark study of the secular (Taylor 2007) that religion in the modern world has become "one option among many"—and with that optionality inherently comes a new level of self-awareness and reflection about the status of religion and its relation to the secular. This important conceptual shift is likewise part of Nongbri's account of why we cannot simply apply our notion of religion to earlier phenomena: "the very idea of 'being religious' requires a companion notion of what it would mean to be 'not religious,' and this dichotomy was not part of the ancient world" (Nongbri 2013, 4).

How might we think about the respective phenomena that exist after the new self-conscious awareness of religion and art? With a focus again on overlapping phenomena, it would be useful to pick up Nongbri's suggestion that there might be an "informed and strategic deployment of anachronism" (Nongbri 2013, 158) in a way that might offer useful re-description and illumination of phenomena that would otherwise be obscure. In other words, if religion, as he puts it, is "not a universally applicable first-order concept that matches a native discursive field in every culture across time and throughout history," there might be some utility in its use as "*a second-order, redescriptive concept*" (Nongbri 2013, 158).

While Nongbri primarily proposes making use of such deliberate use of anachronism with respect to ancient phenomena, we might consider the potential for future-directed uses of it, as well. In the case of art, it is not hard to see how something like Nongbri's "redescriptive" conception of construing a culture or system *as*

a kind of religion might serve—at least, with respect to some phenomena—as a resource. James Simpson has recently argued, for example, that in order to understand the role of the modern and post-modern museum one needs to see it as continuing in key ways the dynamic between iconoclasm and iconophilia: “The broken obelisks of Newman, the written-over surfaces of Twombly, the flat, even, colorless dispersals of Reinhardt: all are set in the space of vast white walls and transparent windows of the Enlightenment museum, which resembles nothing so much as the Puritan temple... The museum performs abstraction even as it displays abstraction on its walls. As it does so, it resacralizes the image” (Simpson 2010, 48). At the same time, there are artists and works that pose questions that are not specifically understood as coming from a particular religious tradition but have a resonance with the concerns of earlier religious traditions: James Elkins has studied a number of differing ways in which contemporary art has not left religious concerns behind (Elkins 2004), and artists like Bill Viola disclaim distinctively religious motives in their artwork but nonetheless can be usefully considered in the proximity of artists such as Michelangelo who made use of identifiable religious themes (Bernier 2014).

Such deliberate employment of categories thought to be anachronistic might be useful for phenomena that present themselves initially as religious but for which aesthetic and artistic considerations might also be especially useful. Andrew Chignell, Terence Cuneo and Nicholas Wolterstorff, among others, have all recently suggested that if religious practices as well as religious convictions are important to consider in the lives of the religiously committed, then a reconsideration of the various liturgical connections relevant for such believers might be an important line of philosophical and theological exploration (Chap. 6, this volume, Cuneo 2016, Wolterstorff 2015). In thinking about such distinctly religious liturgical connections—what it is like to be connected to a larger set of rituals or meanings which I understand only in part for example—the exploration of aesthetic and artistic considerations might be of particular use.

Philosophically, there seem then to be two larger conclusions to be drawn from an examination of the similar problematics of the “past” and the “future” of religion and art together. The first is the methodological point shared by both Nongbri and Kristeller, that appropriate rigor needs to be applied in terms of our use of such terms. But the second is that we might find a number of ways in which creative and “anachronistic” re-appropriation of these terms—either in looking at “overlapping” ancient phenomena or in considering our allegedly post-artistic or post-religious practices—might offer useful heuristic resources for future philosophers of religion.

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Chapter 15

Psychoanalysis and the Monotheistic Origins of Modern Science



Kenneth Reinhard

Abstract For Freud, the question of where psychoanalysis stands in relation to religion, science, and philosophy was clear: as a continuation of the project of Enlightenment, psychoanalysis was on the side of science, usually allied with philosophy, and almost always against religion. Freud's medical education included study in the newly developing synthesis of biology and physics associated with the Berlin Physicalist Society lead by Herman Helmholtz and Ernst Brücke. Helmholtz's dynamic theory of energy as subject to displacement and transformation but fundamentally indestructible would be key to Freud's account of "libido" and his early understanding of the dynamic relationship of conscious and unconscious aspects of mind. Freud fully expected that in time all of the discoveries of psychoanalysis would be corroborated and established on a quantitative foundation, as modern science unfolded from the "Copernican Turn" represented above all by Galileo's mathematization of astronomy and physics. Freud also explicitly connected psychoanalysis with the "second Copernican Turn" announced by Kant's critical philosophy, which, on the one hand, bracketed both theological and Rationalist beliefs in knowledge through revelation or pure reason, and on the other, criticized Empiricist attempts to define knowledge in terms of direct perception. Like Kant, Freud insisted that science needed to take the fact of subjectivity into account, but whereas for Kant this meant describing the transcendental structure of the subject, for Freud the subject is always a singular conjunction of individual and phylogenetic history. As a modern science, psychoanalysis would take its cue from Nietzsche and Darwin, and expand in parallel with developments in modern physics and biology as well as research in the social and cultural sciences.

Keywords Psychoanalysis · Freud · Lacan · Subjectivity · Modern science

For Freud, the question of where psychoanalysis stands in relation to religion, science, and philosophy was clear: as a continuation of the project of Enlightenment,

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psychoanalysis was on the side of science, usually allied with philosophy, and almost always against religion. Freud's medical education included study in the newly developing synthesis of biology and physics associated with the Berlin Physicalist Society lead by Herman Helmholtz and Ernst Brücke. Helmholtz's dynamic theory of energy as subject to displacement and transformation but fundamentally indestructible would be key to Freud's account of "libido" and his early understanding of the dynamic relationship of conscious and unconscious aspects of mind. Freud fully expected that in time all of the discoveries of psychoanalysis would be corroborated and established on a quantitative foundation, as modern science unfolded from the "Copernican Turn" represented above all by Galileo's mathematization of astronomy and physics. Freud also explicitly connected psychoanalysis with the "second Copernican Turn" announced by Kant's critical philosophy, which, on the one hand, bracketed both theological and Rationalist beliefs in knowledge through revelation or pure reason, and on the other, criticized Empiricist attempts to define knowledge in terms of direct perception. Like Kant, Freud insisted that science needed to take the fact of subjectivity into account, but whereas for Kant this meant describing the transcendental structure of the subject, for Freud the subject is always a singular conjunction of individual and phylogenetic history. As a modern science, psychoanalysis would take its cue from Nietzsche and Darwin, and expand in parallel with developments in modern physics and biology as well as research in the social and cultural sciences.

Freud, for the most part, saw religion as an "illusion" developed through the projection of infantile wishes onto and beyond nature, and the concomitant belief in a metaphysical world where God the Father makes up for the deficiencies of our all too human actual mothers and fathers. Freud was also painfully aware that religion was often the lens through which aggressivity was focused onto outsiders and scapegoats such as the Jews, and he was sensitive to what he perceived as the hypocrisy of Christian universalism. Yet he remained fascinated by religion, and continued to regard it as a powerful source of information about the primitive structures of mental life and social organization. His last great work, *Moses and Monotheism*, moreover, goes beyond the project of cultural interpretation or ideological critique of religion and, through the clinical technique he calls "construction," attempts to intervene in collective fantasy.¹

For Freud's great follower, Jacques Lacan, the question of the relationship of psychoanalysis to religion, science, and philosophy remains central. Although Lacan makes it clear that, like Freud, he is an atheist, Lacan's understanding of the role of religion in the history of the subject is quite different from Freud's. Lacan was influenced by the work of Alexandre Koyré, the Russian-French philosopher of science who argued that the crucial role of monotheism in the development of scientific thinking was the Torah's account of *creation* as a necessary step in breaking with the

¹See my essay "The Freudian Things: Construction and the Archaeological Metaphor" (Reinhard 1995).

“closed universe” of the pagan world.² For Lacan, Judaism and Christianity not only represent symptoms of both “civilization” and its “discontents,” but also constitute historical cuts that led to the emergence of a type of subjectivity specific to science and, in turn, a necessary precondition of psychoanalysis. In his essay “Science and Truth,” Lacan insists that the central point is not “whether psychoanalysis is a science,” but “the fact that its praxis implies no other subject than that of science” (Lacan 2002, p. 733). For Lacan, the concept of a “subject of science” does not imply the claim that psychoanalysis should aspire to the condition of science, but raises the question of its implications *for* science, that is, what sort of science would be able to accommodate the discoveries of psychoanalysis – the discovery, in particular, of the intimate relationship between our bodies and language in *jouissance*. Moreover, Lacan makes the surprising claim that the subject of science addressed by psychoanalysis is no other than the Cartesian *cogito*, the kicking boy of “self-consciousness” for much of contemporary anti-humanist French philosophy.

Lacan’s understanding of the relationship of psychoanalysis to science evolves over the course of his career. If earlier in his thinking, Lacan sees the work of psychoanalysis as a process of *formalization*, reduction to essential structures expressed in quasi-mathematical terms or “mathemes,” in his later work he argues that the transformative work of psychoanalysis depends on the encounter with *impasses* in formalization, and the remnants of “the real” that are left over from symbolization – bits of traumatic enjoyment or *jouissance*. Whereas he often summarized his thinking in the 1960s in the aphorism “a signifier represents the subject for another signifier,” in the 1970s the enigmatic formulation “there’s no such thing as a sexual relationship” dominates his discourse. For Lacan the concept of the impossibility of the sexual relationship first emerges in monotheism’s originary break with pagan cosmology. In returning to that historical cut and its later reinflection in the *cogito*, psychoanalysis establishes the terms for its practice and its reconceptualization of modern science.

This essay is an attempt to explicate Lacan’s argument about the emergence of science from monotheism, and how psychoanalysis depends on and transforms the idea of science. Of course, these are highly complicated and interconnected issues, so these remarks should be understood as an introduction with examples, rather than a definitive statement.

Lacan elaborates on Koyré’s argument already in 1960 in the session of his Seminar 7, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, entitled “On Creation *ex nihilo*”:

Modern science, the kind that was born with Galileo, could only have developed out of biblical, Jewish ideology, and not out of ancient philosophy or the Aristotelian tradition. The increasing power of symbolic mastery has not stopped enlarging its field of operation since Galileo ... In other words, the vault of the heavens no longer exists, and all the celestial bodies ... appear as if they could just as well not be there. Their reality, as existentialism puts it, is essentially characterized by their facticity; they are fundamentally contingent. (Lacan 1992, p. 122 trans. slightly modified)

² See Kojève’s “L’origine Chrétienne de la science moderne” (Kojève 1964) and Koyré’s *From the Close World to the Infinite Universe* (Koyré 1957).

In Lacan's reading of Koyré, God's creation of the universe through speaking means the introduction of a signifier, in all its properties. First of all, this implies that the world as created could just as easily *not* have been created; the monotheistic event of creation introduces *contingency* into the world, which no longer can be regarded in terms of the necessity that governs the classical cosmic order. Creationism is the denaturalization of nature which, by this originary gesture, is increasingly subject to "symbolic mastery" by speaking human beings. This combination of contingency and symbolization in creation *ex nihilo* characterizes the structure of the signifier as such, which is indeed contingent (or "arbitrary" and "conventional," in Saussure's terms).³ In the Hebrew Bible, however, God does not create the world from nothing, but from a primal chaos, *tohu va bohu*; the "nothing" only emerges as the final act of creation. That is, contrary to popular assumptions about the seven days of creation, God did not have a six day work week, and then knocked off for the Sabbath; rather, the Bible says that God *finished* his work on the seventh day, and then rested. So what did he make on the seventh day? According to the Rabbis, God *made rest*, which is thus not just the stopping of work, but an act of making, a kind of subtractive *poesis*. That is, creation *ex nihilo* is not creation "from out of" nothing, but creation *of* nothing, the production of the gap of "rest" that rather than completing creation, *de*-completes it. Recall too that in Lurianic Judaism, God's creation begins through the subtractive process of *tsim tsum*, God's "reduction" of himself in order to make room for creation. In Seminar 7, Lacan describes the structural gap introduced by the signifier through the familiar biblical allegory of God as the "potter" and his creation as the "pot" (cf. Isaiah 64:8): "The potter, just like you to whom I am speaking, creates the vase with his hand around this emptiness, creates it, just like the mythical creator, *ex nihilo*, starting with a hole ... the fashioning of a signifier and the introduction into the real of a gap or hole are identical" (Lacan 1992, p. 121, trans. slightly modified).

In emphasizing God's speech-act of creation as a contingent act of the production of a void, Lacan here defines the origins of modern science around a nascent theory of the signifier. The inaugural gesture of science, then, is neither empiricism nor symbolization in the sense of finding meaning in the natural world, but on the contrary, science requires the introduction of the signifier as something that *is not*, that exists only as difference and through no necessity. We can understand this in terms of the concept of the variable, developed by Descartes and other mathematicians in the seventeenth century. According to Lacan, "From the moment when logic has come to the point of confronting something that supports a reference to truth, it has produced the notion of a variable" (Lacan 2011, p. 11).⁴ In order for

³Lacan comments, that although Saussure characterizes the signifier as arbitrary, "it would have been better to qualify the signifier with the category of contingency" (Lacan 1998, p.40).

⁴Lacan already locates the function of the mathematical variable in "the ambiguity of substance and subject" in Aristotle's concept of the subject: "The *hupokeimenon* is perfectly isolated by him insofar as, logically, it is nothing other than that which mathematical logic was able to isolate later in the function of the variable, that is, that which can only be designated by a predicative proposition" (Lacan 2006), p. 348. My translation.

there to be science, the world must be understood not as full of meaning (which is indeed the nature of the pagan cosmology), but as *full of signifiers*, and this in turn assumes that it is structured by the lack or self-difference which the signifier brings with it. Lacan expands on this point in his Seminar 13, *The Object of Psychoanalysis*:

That which is essential is the hole. And because it's essential that it be the hole, the Jewish enunciation that God made the world from nothing is properly speaking, as Koyré thought, taught, and wrote, what opened up the path to the object of science. People have become bogged down, or remained stuck on all the qualities, whatever they may be, from force, impulsion, color, anything you wish, in short, to perception, to the piece of chalk to which the Socratic offspring remain stuck like flies on flypaper for two thousand years. ... The piece of chalk becomes an object of science from the moment and since the moment that you begin from this point which consists in considering it as lacking. (unpublished; session of 12/8/1965, my translation)

The science that begins with Aristotle and that will guide philosophy through the Middle Ages is based on a logic of predication, in which things are assumed to have attributes that are available to us via sensory perception. According to Lacan, however, the essence of modern science does not lie in its description, for example, of the properties of a piece of chalk (probably a reference to a passage from Plato's *Phaedo*⁵), but in *the possibility of the chalk not being there*. This is an extension of the notion of the linguistic signifier as based on lack into a concept of the object as based on its own absence: to be an object for modern science, a thing must be understood as potentially *not*-there.

Lacan clarifies this by referring to a parable of the principle of the conservation of energy proposed by Richard Feynman (Feynman 1964).⁶ In Feynman's story, Dennis the Menace has 28 indestructible identical blocks; every day his mother puts him in a room with his blocks, and every evening she counts the blocks, to see if they are all there. One day she only counts 27 blocks, but she soon discovers one hidden beneath a rug. But sometimes a block can't be found, and she suspects it might be in a toy box that Dennis refuses to let her open. So she weighs a block, and then by comparing the weight of the box when a block is missing to the weight of the box when she can account for them all, she can infer that the missing block must indeed be in the toy box. Another day, when the dirty water in Dennis' bathtub is slightly elevated, she can measure its volume and conclude that the missing box must be in there, even though she can't see it. Feynman points out that the existence of a constant number representing the totality of energy in the system allows for these calculations. But for Lacan, the key point of Feynman's example lies in his comment "the most remarkable aspect that must be abstracted from this picture is that *there are no blocks*"; For Feynman, this means that energy is not a thing in the

⁵Lacan is probably referring to Socrates' description of the earth: "Well then, my friend, in the first place it is said that the earth, looked at from above, looks like those spherical balls made up of 12 pieces of leather; it is multi-colored, and of these colors those used by our painters give us an indication; up there the whole earth has these colors, but much brighter and purer than these; one part is sea-green and of marvelous beauty, another is golden, another is white, whiter than chalk or snow." Plato (1997), p. 94.

⁶See Chapter 4 on "Conservation of Energy," p. 1–8.

same way that a block is, but for Lacan this comment suggests that this foundational scientific principle requires the concept of something *missing*: “the constant number [*chiffre*] that guarantees the fundamental principle of the conservation of energy ... is the very condition of scientific thinking. But what does constant mean here? ... That means that something that is lack as such – there is no block – is to be found elsewhere, in another kind of lack. The scientific object is passage, response, metabolism ... of the object as lack” (Lacan 1965).⁷ This abstract notion of the object as *missing* is the condition of possibility of both thermodynamics and psychoanalysis, for which the object of desire is *lost as such*. Lacan summarizes the implications of these accounts of the signifier and the object:

Thus here we are before the following position: the subject can only function by being defined as a cut, the object as a lack. [...] Such a structure is necessary for a cut to determine the field, on the one hand, of the subject as it is necessitated as the subject of science, and on the other hand, the hole where there originates a certain mode of the object, the only one to be retained, the one that is called the object of science. (Lacan 1965)⁸

Lacan first presented his essay “Science and Truth,” subsequently published as the final essay in *Écrits*, as the opening talk of his 1965–66 seminar on the *Object of Psychoanalysis*. It also appeared in the first issue of *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, a journal edited by philosophy students at the Ecole Normal Supérieure which published essays by Lacan and Althusser, as well as Foucault, Derrida, Irigaray, Badiou, and others. The *Cahiers* called for a scientifically rigorous structuralism, based in mathematics as much as linguistics, a structuralism which they saw as opposed to the various modes of humanism, existentialism, and vitalism that had been dominant in French intellectual life since after the war. And although Lacan’s essay is a central statement of that call, it resists being reduced to a simple message, persisting in the singularity of its utterance. In this context, Lacan’s argument that the subject of science is the subject of the *cogito* must have been rather shocking.⁹ Lacan had spent a good deal of time in the previous 2 years of his seminar rethinking the Cartesian subject, and these ideas crystallized in “Science and Truth.” Once again, Lacan remarks “Koyré is my guide here,” as the bridge from monotheism to the Cartesian subject and modern science. Lacan continues:

⁷ Session of December 8, 1965. My translation.

⁸ Session of Dec. 8, 1965 (my translation).

⁹ To make matters even more complicated, Lacan also asserts that psychoanalysis is an *anti-philosophy*, insofar as modes of unconscious thinking that it addresses are excluded from the fundamental assumptions of philosophy. If philosophy is first of all “love of truth,” for Lacan truth is something that can only be “half-said” and that tells us nothing about the real. As Lacan argues in his extraordinarily dense essay, “L’Étourdit,” the knowledge that psychoanalysis pursues does not operate according to Aristotle’s principle of non-contradiction and the distinction between “sense” and “nonsense”; rather, psychoanalytic knowledge involves a third mode of meaning that Lacan calls *ab-sense*. Moreover the “object” proper to psychoanalytic *ab-sense*, what Lacan calls the *objet a*, exceeds the classical philosophical distinction between subject and object; like the particles of contemporary physics, it can only be viewed indirectly, by “looking awry.”

I took my lead last year from a certain moment of the subject that I consider to be an essential correlate of science, a historically defined moment ... the moment Descartes inaugurates that goes by the name of *cogito*. This correlate, as a moment, is the defile of a rejection of all knowledge, but is nevertheless claimed to establish for the subject a certain anchoring in being; I sustain that this anchoring constitutes the definition of the subject of science. (Lacan 2002, p. 727)

Lacan's commentary on the *cogito* is extensive and rich, and I can only make a few comments about it here. First of all, we recall that Descartes reaches his epiphany of subjectivity only as the culmination of a systematic process of doubt, "a rejection of all knowledge." In the process of emptying the world of *knowledge* by doubting all meaning, whether received or perceived, Descartes establishes the grounds of *truth* on what he takes as the certainty of *being*. Although I may doubt everything I have been taught and even what I have seen for myself, the very fact of that doubt is immediate, to doubt it would be simply to confirm it; and just as the fact of the pot is taken as proof of the existence of a potter, so the act of doubting immediately implies that there must be a doubter. So epistemological doubt leads to ontological certainty, "anchoring in being," as Lacan puts it, which will serve as the basis (with a little help from God) for Descartes' re-construction of a new account of scientific knowledge based on the "clear and distinct" ideas that seem to share in that initial moment of certainty. This new account of knowledge is fundamentally different from classical epistemology: just as the created world of monotheism opened the door for science through the decompletion of the natural world of Aristotle, so the subject of modern science emerges only through the decompletion of the field of knowledge, which is constituted as such by the kernel of truth that stands outside its field, the remainder left over from radical skepticism. For Lacan, Descartes' declaration "I think, therefore I am" is not the claim of the identity of thinking and being in a self-conscious, self-identical subject, but must be understood as an *utterance*, as if the second half of it were in quotation marks: I think "therefore I am." As the effect of an act of speaking, the subject of the *cogito* is split into two distinct entities: the "I" who thinks or speaks, and the "I" who *is thought or spoken*. The subject of science thus is not a unified mental substance, but fundamentally divided.

Lacan's reading of the *cogito* leads him, as he writes, "to formulate our experienced division as subjects as a division between knowledge and truth, and to accompany it with a topological model, the Möbius strip; this strip conveys the fact that the division in which these two terms come together is not to be derived from a difference in origin" (*Écrits* 727). The division of the subject between "knowledge" and "truth" is not a distinction between epistemological sources or substances, but functions like a Möbius strip, which may appear to have two sides like a sheet of paper, but is in fact a single-sided surface, a continuous flow of recto and verso. That is, the difference between truth and knowledge is a function of the contingent relationship between *any* two signifiers. This is the relationship that for Lacan will define the subject itself in his aphorism, "a signifier represents a subject for another signifier." The first signifier, which Lacan calls S_1 , derives from Freud's notion of a "unary trait" [*einzigster Zug*], the mark of "primal repression" that is the condition of

all other repressions, hence constitutive of the subject of the unconscious. According to Lacan, this signifier falls out of the symbolic order and becomes intransigent, fossilized, in primal repression; that is, it doesn't function as part of the differential movement that characterizes the unconscious chains of signifiers, but constitutes a dead point of non-meaning on which the movement of signification stumbles, time and again. And rather than being the product of a subject, this signifier is the indication or place holder of the existence of a subject for "another signifier" that Lacan calls S_2 , standing for the various chains of signifiers that make up a symbolic order. Unlike the "sign," which signifies *something for someone* (a meaning for another individual), the signifier, according to Lacan, represents *someone for something* – that is, a *subject* for the other signifiers that make up a symbolic order.¹⁰ Thus, rather than a self-identical individual who uses language as a tool, the subject is the effect of a purely contingent difference between signifiers. We could say that S_2 stands for the realm of "knowledge" for the subject of science only insofar as it is decompleted by the "truth" of S_1 , the pure being of a signifier which has fallen out of the movement of signification.

In the 1970s Lacan returns to the question of the relationship between monotheism, science, and psychoanalysis. In his Seminar 20, he again links the emergence of a signifier in the biblical creation with the possibility of modern science:

Genesis recounts nothing other than the creation, from nothing, in effect ... of nothing but signifiers. As soon as this creation emerges, it is articulated on the basis of the naming of what is. Isn't that creation in its essence? While Aristotle cannot help but enunciate that, if ever there was anything, it had always been there, isn't what is at stake in creationism a creation on the basis of nothing – thus on the basis of a signifier? Isn't that what we find in that which ... was enunciated as the Copernican revolution? (Lacan 1998, p. 41)

It is, however, not Copernicus who marks the emergence of modern science for Lacan, but Galileo, as well as Kepler, and his account of the elliptical orbit of the planets, and Newton, who explains this gravitational movement in terms of a mathematical formula. Whereas the world of Aristotle and pagan cosmology is eternal and full, the world represented by *Genesis* is temporal and incomplete: the very fact of the existence of *speaking beings*, creatures whose first act in the world is to give it names, is the condition of possibility of the formalization of modern science. The process of mathematical formalization defines the work of psychoanalysis; Lacan continues, "Nothing seems to better constitute the horizon of analytic discourse than the use made of the letter by mathematics" (Lacan 1998, p. 44). Moreover, Lacan points out that Aristotle's classical epistemology implies an *ethics*:

If Aristotle props up his God with the unmoving sphere on the basis of which everyone must pursue his good, it is because that sphere is supposed to know what is good for it. That is what the break introduced by scientific discourse obliges us to do without. There is no need to know why – we no longer have any need for the knowledge Aristotle situates at the origin. In order to explain the effects of gravitation, we don't need to assume the stone knows where it must land [...] There is, according to analytic discourse, an animal that happens to be endowed with the ability to speak and who, because he inhabits the signifier, is thus a

¹⁰Lacan makes this distinction, among other places, in Lacan (1978), p.207.

subject of it. Henceforth, everything is played out for him at the level of fantasy ... But this isn't tantamount to the beginnings of a cosmology. ... Psychoanalysis, insofar as it derives its very possibility from the discourse of science, is not a cosmology" (Lacan 1998, p. 88)

If earlier in Lacan's work, language meant first of all speech, and the division of the subject between utterance and statement (as in his reading of the *cogito*), now it is language as *writing* that is of primary interest to Lacan, writing as epitomized by mathematics. If Lacan's earlier thinking can be characterized by the expression "a signifier represents a subject for another signifier," it is increasingly supplemented in the 1970s by the aphorism, "there's no such thing as a sexual relationship." And writing is precisely what conceals the lack of a sexual relationship, as Lacan remarks in *Seminar XIX ... ou pire*: "The fact of language, that is, when one approaches it in terms of its essential function, is to fill everything that is left gaping by the fact that there can be no sexual relationship, which means that no writing as a product of language can take account of it in a satisfying fashion" (Lacan 2011, p. 29; my translation.) And if earlier Lacan had understood the subject of science in terms of the Cartesian *cogito*, increasingly science for Lacan means mathematics, primarily set theory and topology; and the impossibility of the sexual relationship will be expressed in terms of his mathematical "formulas" of sexuation.

Of course, we should not understand Lacan to be claiming that people don't have sex, which would be absurd. We can think of it, rather, as a corollary to the earlier proposition: the divided subject that emerges as the difference between two signifiers is constituted according to one of two possible configurations named "man" and "woman," which are two different modes of self-division. For Lacan, what Freud calls "castration" is the constitution of the subject between two signifiers: men and women are alienated from their bodies by the mediation of language, which in the process of giving them access to a shared symbolic order also denies them any direct, unmediated experience of corporeal *jouissance*. What Lacan calls "the phallus" is the mark of this castration, and what he calls "phallic *jouissance*" is the residual enjoyment that language also grants us some limited access to, left over from its radical loss through the subjectifying event of castration. To enter into subjectivity through language is to be deprived of the fullness of animal existence. But there are two modes of "castration," two ways in which language configures a subject as a man or a woman, and those two modes are asymmetrical and incommensurable with each other, not reciprocal or complementary; hence no direct relationship between the subjects who hold those positions is possible. It should go without saying that for Lacan these two sexual positions have nothing to do with biological gender: a woman can inhabit a male body and a man can just as easily inhabit the body of a female. Nor do they have anything to do with object choice, homosexual or heterosexual.

But what does the lack of a sexual relationship have to do with science? Another way Lacan explains the assertion that "there's no such thing as a sexual relationship" is as the claim that the relationship of men and women cannot be written or *formalized*, which is to say that no adequate symbolic articulation of the sexual encounter is possible. This is the argument that the human animal struggles to make sense of sexuality, to put it into words and images, but can never succeed in that

effort at representation, insofar as its constitution as a subject by means of words and images is precisely what prevents it from inhabiting its sexuality as an immediate experience. To paraphrase Slavoj Žižek paraphrasing Hegel, the mystery of human sexuality is a mystery to human beings themselves. This concept of the impossibility of a sexual relationship comes to define Lacan's developing concept of what he calls "the real." If in his earlier work, Lacan understood the real first as the facts of personal history or as what Freud called psychic reality, which attempts to represent and reconcile internal and external affect, later Lacan associates the real with the impossibility of any such reconciliation, as a topographically indeterminate stimulus that is traumatically in excess of symbolization. And finally Lacan comes to see this impossibility as that of the sexual relationship. As Lacan remarks in his *Seminar XIX ... ou pire*:

It is in the very practice of the sexual relationship that there is affirmed the bond [*lien*] of the impossible and the real that we promote, we as speaking beings ... There is no other attestation of the real. ... What we have to be suspicious of in all reality is that it might be fantasmatic. And what allows us to escape from [the fantasy of reality] is an impossibility in the symbolic formula that we are able to extract from it, which demonstrates there the real. (Lacan 2011, p. 173–74)

Our experience of reality is intrinsically untrustworthy, prone to all manner of distortion, not only because the specular constitution of the ego installs us within an imaginary order of false resemblance and coherence, but because reality is "fantasmatic," based on the fundamental fantasy that shields us from encountering the lack in the symbolic order, the disjunction between S_1 and S_2 . Hence if we are to confront the "real," it will not be by debunking reality as imaginary (or "ideological" in the sense of a false image), but by facing the inconsistency of the symbolic order, the impossibility, finally, of formalizing the sexual relationship. And what would be the aim of science, if not to approach the real?

Finally, for Lacan the great act of monotheism is its interruption of what he describes as the essence of pagan cosmology: its belief in a "sexual relationship," a world organized by reciprocal Male and Female principles such as earth and sky, matter and spirit. As Lacan remarks in his *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, "In that pagan ambiance at the time when it was flourishing, the *numen* rises up at every step, at the corner of every road, in grottoes, at crossroads; it weaves human experience together, and we can still see traces of it in a great many fields. That is something that contrasts greatly with the monotheistic profession of faith" (Lacan 1992, p. 172). In purging the world of its animism, its belief in gods who copulate with human beings, in spirits that inhabit nature, monotheism is asserting the real, the lack of a sexual relationship, which will become the fundamental principle of psychoanalytic science. And increasingly, this will define science as such for Lacan. He notes this shift in emphasis in his *Seminar XX: Encore*:

[T]here was a time when one could, not without reason, assure oneself that scientific discourse was grounded in the Galilean turning point. I have stressed that enough to assume that ... some of you have gone back to the sources, I mean to Koyré's work. On the one hand, scientific discourse has engendered all sorts of instruments that we must ... qualify as gadgets. ... On the other hand – and here there is no linkup – there is a subversion of knowl-

edge [*connaissance*]. Prior to that, no knowledge was conceived that did not participate in the fantasy of an inscription of the sexual link. ... Let us simply consider the terms ‘active’ and ‘passive,’ for example, that dominate everything that was cogitated regarding the relationship between form and matter, a relationship that was so fundamental, and to which each of Plato’s steps refers, and then Aristotle’s, concerning the nature of things. It is visible and palpable that their statements are based only on a fantasy by which they tried to make up for what can in no way be said, namely, the sexual relationship. (Lacan 1998, p. 82)

Science is itself divided: on the one hand it aspires to approach and formalize the real, on the other, it produces an endless series of “gadgets” such as contemporary media technologies and social networks that reinforce the illusion of relationship. But despite its instrumentalization in technology, the fundamental principle of science is the “subversion of knowledge,” that is, the critique of knowledge as *connaissance*, which in French indicates something like “familiarity” and needs to be distinguished from the knowledge that analysis produces, which Lacan refers to as *savoir*. The subversion of *connaissance* is the work of Cartesian doubt, which defamiliarizes the world for the sake of establishing a new certainty.

At this point in Lacan’s thinking, however, it is not formalization alone that makes psychoanalysis a science, which, even when understood in terms of the differential signifier, still remains uncomfortably close to the assumption that it is possible for science to fully symbolize the world. Kant already sensed that this was a problematic assumption (although his concept of the “noumenal” merely displaces the problem), but modern mathematics addresses it directly in, for example, Gödel’s incompleteness theorems and Russell’s paradox of the set of all sets that don’t include themselves. For the later Lacan, psychoanalytic formalization approaches the real insofar as it *fails*; as he says in *Encore*, “the real can only be inscribed on the basis of an *impasse* in formalization. That is why I thought I could provide a model of it using mathematical formalization, inasmuch as it is the most advanced elaboration we have by which to produce signifierness. The mathematical formalization of signifierness runs counter to meaning” (Lacan 1998, p. 93).

For Lacan, the science of psychoanalysis involves, on the one hand, the production of mathemes that *formalize* its knowledge in the purest, most condensed, and most transmissible form of writing possible. On the other hand, it is only when formalization *fails*, reaches an *impasse*, that it can encounter the real that cannot be written (the lack of a sexual relationship); and this is the point when psychoanalysis becomes not only a mode of knowledge, but an *act*, and intervention with the possibility of therapeutic value. For Freud too, the limited power of understanding was always a problem: as he soon discovered, the knowledge produced by psychoanalysis, both its theoretical account of the structures of neurosis and its interpretations of particular dreams and symptoms, does not in itself effect subjective transformation. The unconscious easily accommodates the most perspicacious of interpretations into the networks of signification that shelter its fundamental fantasy, which is remarkably resistant to change. Freud continued to seek techniques that would break through this analytic impotence, including his developing ideas about the nature of transference and his late attempt to distinguish the analytic act of “construction” (a sort of fictional narrative produced *ex nihilo*) from the interminable

work of interpretation. For Lacan, psychoanalytic theory cannot be secured against the inevitability of the signifier's drift; both his followers and critics alike will fill the gap of the impossibility of the sexual relationship with meanings that will be "worse" than that impossibility itself. The language of mathematics, insofar as the signifier on which it is based carries with it the "nothing" introduced into the world by monotheism in its inaugural break from a sexually unified cosmology, is the best chance psychoanalysis has to preserve its essential knowledge. The "little letters" that psychoanalysis borrows from mathematics to write its *savoir* are addressed to a future that we can only hope will know how to read them, and if not, at least will pass them on intact.

This account of Lacan's mathemes may seem to cast the formulas of psychoanalysis as a sort of "revelation," but if so, we should recall that revelation by itself is not enough to transform a people. Moses seems to encounter such an "impasse" in formalization when he brings the divine law down from Mount Sinai, only to find that his brother Aaron has re-established the fundamental fantasy of paganism in the shape of the Golden Calf. Moses responds to this impasse in the most shocking of acts: smashing the tablets of the law themselves – the very symbolic structures obscured by the Israelites' relapse into the imaginary pleasures of idolatry. For Lacan, formalization in mathemes allows psychoanalysis to produce an integrally transmissible knowledge, but formalization also inevitably leads to impasses where it founders against the rock of the real. And it is precisely at those points of impasse where what Lacan calls the *pass* becomes possible, the psychoanalytic *act* where the structure of fantasy that supports reality is shifted, or in Lacan's expression, "traversed," exposing new aspects of the real, and new ways of encountering the lack of a sexual relationship.¹¹

Although psychoanalytic science could only have developed from out of monotheism, Lacan's relationship to religion is complex and ambivalent: on the one hand, monotheism enacts the break from what he calls cosmology, the belief in a universe that is unified, totalized, and organized into reciprocal gendered principles such as form and matter. Monotheism introduces into that decompleted world the conditions of possibility for the signifier, the subject, and the object, thereby establishing openings onto modern science and psychoanalysis, which both attempt to encounter and expose, in their own ways, the fabric of the real. On the other hand, in a 1974 interview entitled "The Triumph of Religion" Lacan presents religion as the antagonist of science and psychoanalysis insofar as it is the ultimate meaning-making machine, able to absorb whatever traumatic real emerges through science and to integrate it into the divine plan. Lacan argues that this is precisely what modern science and psychoanalysis are *not* trying to do; their work is not to find meaning in the real, but on the contrary, to strip away all projections of meaning, in order to reveal it without any assumptions about its reason or end. Science and psychoanalysis, Lacan remarks, introduce "all kinds of distressing things into each person's life,"

¹¹ The "pass" is a process in Lacanian schools whereby it is affirmed that a psychoanalytic act has happened. This can be the signal that an analysand has "passed" into the position of analyst. See Eric Laurent's essay, "The Pass and the Guarantee in the School."

bits of *the real* that challenge our desire for meaning, our residual primitive belief that the world is a balanced and orderly cosmos. Religion, on the other hand, attempts to find purpose in every threatening novelty that emerges: “Since the beginning, religion has been all about giving meaning to things that previously were natural ... Religion is going to give meaning to the oddest experiments, the very ones that scientists themselves are just beginning to become anxious about ... It will find correspondences between everything and everything else. That’s its very function” (Lacan 2013, p. 65–66). Psychoanalysis must also be vigilant about its own tendencies to give up on Freud’s discoveries, a tendency for Lacan represented primarily by the Chicago School of ego psychology, which he relentlessly criticizes in his work in the 1950s. Lacan, however, is by no means convinced that psychoanalysis and science will prevail in their battles with religion over the real. For now, there is still some science and some psychoanalysis; “But,” Lacan comments darkly, “you will see that humanity will be cured of psychoanalysis. By drowning the symptom in meaning, in religious meaning naturally, people will manage to repress it” (67). Science is the ally of psychoanalysis in this gigantomachia with religion, but science can easily slip into mere technicity, the production of “gadgets” that, as Heidegger also argues, keep the real at a distance. And because of this propensity of religion and technical science to give up on or actively repress the real, psychoanalysis must insist on the distinction between encountering the real and symbolizing it.

Freud’s evident commitment to science seemed to assure his followers that psychoanalysis was simply the next stage in a history of civilization that was moving inexorably from the imaginary beliefs of religion to the increasingly precise realism of modern science. But over the course of his long career, Lacan reread Freud with extraordinary attention to what Freud actually wrote, and discovered there things that many of his followers thought he surely could not possibly mean. Like Freud, Lacan knew that psychoanalysis needed to confront religion, science, and philosophy; but for Lacan, it was not evident what would come out of those encounters. The “relationships” that would emerge always risked obscuring more fundamental differences and antagonisms. Nevertheless, it is precisely in the *impasses* of its relationships with religion, science, and philosophy that psychoanalysis has the chance of opening a *pass* into something new.

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Chapter 16

William James Revisted: “Pragmatic” Approaches to Religion



David C. Lamberth

Abstract This essay examines how William James conceptualized the philosophy of religion, including his view about the future of religion, for the purpose of aiding our own view on the future of this field in the present age. It focuses on three different aspects of his thought about religion against a backdrop of the centrality of our evolutionary, creaturely frame. First, I talk about selected pre-*Varieties* essays, in which James focuses on the relations of thought and action. In so doing, I will note where theism fits in for James then, and attend to his very straightforward conceptual generalizations about what religion implies. Second, I talk about James’s psychological findings about religion, glossing some of the details of *Varieties* with regard to the individual and social aspects of religion. And third, I turn briefly to the developed “pragmatic” and “radical-empiricist” period of James’s thought, where he delineates religion’s connection to his pluralistic meliorism. This culminates in a clear suggestion that the twenty-first century is not likely to see humankind evolving “beyond” religion, in any meaningful sense.

Keywords William James · Pragmatism · Philosophy of religion · Psychology · Meliorism

The topic of “Philosophy and the Future of Religion” is salient, pointing us forward from our own present. It also perhaps a bit enigmatically suggests the question of whether there is a future for religion? From seeing the overall plan for this year’s lecture series, I trust that both of these topics will be addressed from several different directions.

What I hope to do today is to address the topic of philosophy and the future of religion from what inevitably is a somewhat historical vantage. Specifically, I want to use the work of William James as a focusing lens to bring into closer view how this question might have looked a bit more than a century ago. In doing so, I want

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to delineate what James's view of religion involves, to the extent that we can wrap that up into one package. From there I want to say something about how James envisioned religion's future from his perspective. And then finally, near the end of this lecture, I will query how James's views are suggestive for us as we look into the future of religion now. To anticipate, I will highlight how recalcitrant religiosity (and also potentially theism) is, say a bit about the social importance of religion, and, finally, underscore what the moral stakes are for the study of religion. I should note at the outset that this is not a paper focused on close philosophical argumentation, but more one of mapping philosophical views and rationales. I hope, nonetheless, to prove stimulating to your thinking, and our conversation.

16.1 I

James is well-known in philosophy of religion and religious studies (and sometimes highly-regarded in those circles depending on whom you ask). In philosophy James is known best for "pragmatism," a term he coined in print but did not invent, having "kidnapped" it, according to his friend Charles Peirce, from its more specific and limited applications. But in religious studies and philosophy of religion, and among the wider public, it is his writings on "religious experience," his 'definition' of religion in individual and solitary terms, and his account of mysticism that are familiar. These views are all forwarded by the wonderfully written *Varieties of Religious Experience*, published in 1902, and named the second best non-fiction book of all time (though really mostly the twentieth century) by the Modern Library a century later.¹

Varieties appeared relatively late in James's career, 8 years before his death at 68.

But while the book came late, James's interest in religion was longstanding. His earliest essays include "Rationality, Activity and Faith" ([1880] 1882) and the "Introduction to *The Literary Remains of the Late Henry James*" (1884). One of James's final writings in 1910a was "A Suggestion About Mysticism," an article focused on uncommon modes of consciousness. Looking at his work overall, among James's books only *Principles of Psychology* (1890a), its abridgement, and *The Meaning of Truth* (1909a) do not exhibit substantive engagement with religion.²

By contrast *The Will to Believe* (1897), *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), *Pragmatism* (1907) and *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909b) all take up religion significantly.

¹ See Dinitia Smith, "Another Top 100 List: Now It's Nonfiction," *The New York Times*, April 30, 1999. First place went to Henry Adams, third to Booker T. Washington, and fourth to Virginia Woolf, so James was in fine company, despite the problems with such lists.

² The posthumously published collection of essays *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (1912) has little to do with religion, while *Some Problems in Philosophy* (also posthumous, 1910b/1911) treats religion in a number of places.

Taken as a whole, these discussions of religion not only cover a significant range of topics but also approach the subject in several different ways. Were one to read only *Varieties*, one might infer that James approached religion psychologically, albeit with an appreciative, open mind and a non-reductive, maybe apologetic stance. This comes out particularly in his work there as a descriptive psychologist, who looks to the “*documents humains*,” those (auto)biographical records that provide the bulk of his primary source data. But if we want to understand James on religion fully, we should recognize that when James comes to *Varieties*, he already has a developed and specific philosophical view about what human beings are, and about what religion seems to do in the human context. James’s view of the human is a big subject. But suffice it to say that, from the outset, James takes human beings to be embodied, situated creatures—animals, really—functioning in an evolving, much wider natural environment. James’s initial Harvard teaching responsibilities in the 1870s were in physiology and anatomy. Only in 1879 did he move to psychology, founding one of the first empirical psychological labs in the world. He stayed with psychology until well into the 1890s, when he finally was allowed to move fully into philosophy, having become one of the world’s leading psychologists. All this reading and teaching in the physiological domain, as well as his training in pursuit of his only conferred degree (doctor of medicine), influenced James’s very concrete, natural science orientation to human nature. Equally important to James’s views, but also obscured from the perspective of *Varieties*, was James’s early engagement at the Lawrence Scientific School in the 1860s (at Harvard) with experimental approaches to evolutionary thought in the biological sciences, under the purview of Jeffries Wyman, and opposed to the contrary views of Louis Aggasiz.³

The more I reread James,

the more I find his view of the human being to be strikingly contemporary, insofar as he sees us as adaptive, embodied creatures within our physical and social environments.

My primary objective today is to sketch a picture of James’s complex view of religion as a whole. To that end, in what follows I focus on three different aspects of his thought about religion against this backdrop of the centrality of our evolutionary, creaturely frame. First, I want to talk about selected pre-*Varieties* essays, in which he focuses on the relations of thought and action. In so doing, I will note where theism fits in for James then, and attend to his very straightforward conceptual generalizations about what religion implies. Second, I want to talk about James’s psychological findings about religion, glossing some of the details of *Varieties* with regard to the individual and social aspects of religion. And third, I want to turn

³Wyman was more of an influence on James than Aggasiz, according to Perry, and certainly, James’s ideas resonate more with Wyman than with Aggasiz’s denial of Darwinian evolution. See Perry 1935, 1:208–9. Please note that in the interest of promoting open access, I make all references to public domain editions when possible. For writers who publish in English, normally I refer to the original copyrighted edition, which is most likely to be out of copyright and available in public resources such as Google Books and the Open Library, among others.

briefly to the developed “pragmatic” and “radical-empiricist” period of James’s thought, where he delineates religion’s connection to his pluralistic meliorism.

16.1.1 Thought, Action and Theism

James gives an early indication of key features of his view of human thought, action, and religion in his 1881 talk to a group of Unitarian ministers, “Reflex Action and Theism.” There, James seeks to demonstrate the import of neurology’s idea of reflex action, and the corresponding model of a reflex arc, for theism. The reflex arc model suggests that all our outward actions are in fact end points of reflex actions, all of which have their beginnings in external stimuli, via feelings, conducted through our sensory neural systems. “All action is thus re-action on the outer world,” writes James. And all our thought and conscious reflection, rather than being the apex and end of our activity, is instead a middle phase between these outer termini. The only function of thought in the most basic sense, and indeed the only time conscious thought is engaged, James observes, is when there is a need to determine which actions are relevant in a particular case in relation to our own organic ends. Perception and thinking are thus there, James summarizes, only for behavior’s sake (James [1881] 1896, 114).

This privileging of action in understanding mind is something one finds in the thought of Charles Peirce, John Dewey, and indeed in many American thinkers back at least to Jonathan Edwards. It is, in fact, one of the keys that allows one to hold these thinkers together under a banner which now, for convenience sake, we typically call “pragmatism.” But James’s thinking here is not yet programmatic so much as it is descriptive—descriptive of rising tides in scientific explanation and increasingly detailed physiological and biological understanding. Fascinatingly, instead of seeing these new insights as upending the relevance, meaning and value of prior thinking habits such as “theism,” James is instead more apt to read those ideas afresh in relation to the goods or functions they disclose, when properly understood. Thus rather than taking the reflex arc to indicate theism’s irrationality, James points out something different. In a line resonating with Kant’s claim that “morality leads ineluctably to religion,” James writes that, on the basis of the reflex action idea, “anything short of God is not rational; anything more than God is not possible” (James [1881], 116).

James sets aside the question of the existence of God in this essay, instead limiting himself to the question of what the concept of God means, provided that we understand human beings to think conceptually only within the middle of reflex arcs, and then for the sake of behavior and habits. His real point here seems to be that the seemingly speculative concept of God is in fact an important, concrete practical idea: in thinking with it, we orient our actions in ways that orient towards our greater welfare. Moreover, he takes it to be a “natural” thing for us to do in our thought processes, since not only do our knowledge demands need accounting, but also our other interests. “To bid the man’s subjective interests be passive till truth

expresses itself from the environment," James writes in relation to scientific findings, "is to bid the sculptor's chisel be passive till the statue expresses itself from out of the stone" (James [1881] 1897, 103). This seems a significant leap from the notion of the progress of scientific findings; but it is a telling one for understanding where for James religion fits, and potentially makes a difference, in human lives.⁴

In delineating what the thought of God is doing in the reflex arc, it is crucial that James thinks the notion of God fundamentally comports with, and somehow focuses and accentuates, our interests. This category of interest is one James uses repeatedly, in relation to ordinary accounts of human action and ethics, and also religion. In the 1890 "Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," for example, James analyzes ethical obligation (in ways remarkably parallel to Emmanuel Levinas's analysis decades later). Obligation itself, on James's account, can be traced to the play of demands from other human beings. These demands function not only to give rise to obligations to others, but also themselves organize at higher levels in terms of interest. Interest, James thinks, is one of the core features of how we function as adaptive beings, and certainly of how we should understand ourselves.

Relatedly, in these essays and also his 1896 "The Will to Believe" address, God is framed by James as one who shares our more inclusive or "ideal" interests—those interests we prefer in the long run, on the whole, as the big picture. The good, notably, relates closely to this. In a deep way, the good is for James but a general term for possible goods. In the case of the individual, the good indexes directly to interest, as a meta-ordering of demands. But in the social and moral context, which is inevitably part of the environing context we all inhabit and depend on, the good immediately manifests also at the social level. This is so because James sees (again like Levinas) that we not only make demands of ourselves, but even more basically of others. From both an evolutionary view and a philosophical view, we don't have good reason, or even a viable interest, in preferring the demand of a particular individual by default over that of the more aggregate good. (This is the crux of the value of altruism.) James thus anchors not only the social dimension of reality into his view of us, our minds, and our embodied nature in the world; he also anchors the notion of collective goods, and some of the fundamentals of what we now think of socially as democracy.

As in earlier essays, in the "Moral Philosopher" James also turns to religion. Where in the earlier "Reflex Action" essay he was inclined to focus on the theoretical function the idea of God has, in "The Moral Philosopher" he adds a different point. When turning to the idea of God there, he makes clear that, as both an

⁴James's similarities to Kant should be evident. Kant argues on both theoretical and practical grounds that our move to theism is driven by certain needs of reason, and he plays this out differently in terms of intellectual coherence of the natural and intelligible, as well as in terms of a guarantor of justice. James takes God in similar ways, but doesn't give any basis for understanding why God shares our interests, a point that Kant situates in the formal structure of reason. Rather, for James, it seems more that we can only recognize a God who shares our better interests, but that we do recognize this God (or power). And, moreover, this is for James motivational, a point which Kant fully resists.

empirical and a logical matter, the commitment to theism also has a distinctive affective result—one of particular moral consequence. At the essay's conclusion James argues that there is a substantive difference in our moral energies and our overall mood when we “believe that God is there, and that he is one of the claimants” (James [1890b] 1897, 160). When we engage this belief⁵ “the infinite perspective opens out. The scale of the symphony is incalculably prolonged.” And, he writes, at that point “the more imperative ideals now begin to speak with an altogether new objectivity and significance, and to utter the penetrating, shattering, challenging note of appeal” (ibid.). God as a claimant who endures longer than we do, and who is wider in scope than we are, provides a different context for our own ideal claims, and an increased scope for our collective moral action. James makes a similar point in “The Will to Believe,” summarizing religion as involving the claim that “the best things are the more eternal things, the overlapping things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word” (James 1896, 29).

Analytically speaking, this wider scope is still intellectual and conceptual, but crucially for James in the 1890s, it is not merely so. These more-than-finite demands, and this more extensive time frame, awaken something in the moral thinker or person. “They ring out like the call of Victor Hugo’s alpine eagle, ‘qui parle au précipice et que le gouffre entend’ [who calls from the precipice and is heard in the abyss], and the strenuous mood awakens at the sound” (James 1890b, 1896, 160-1). This strenuous mood, a theme James elaborates in “The Energies of Men,” “The Moral Equivalent of War,” and *Pragmatism*, is a critically important, though not necessary feature, of us as human and social beings. And it is also a deep, adaptive capacity. It “lies so deep in our natural human possibilities,” James writes, that “even if there were no metaphysical or traditional grounds for believing in a God, men would postulate one simply as a pretext for living hard, and getting out of the game of existence its keenest possibilities of zest” (ibid., 161). And in a related vein, he notes in “The Will to Believe” that religion not only means ordering our beliefs according to the “more eternal things.” Further it involves the belief that “we are better off now if we believe” this. So here we have the strenuous mood being provoked, as well as an overt characterization of the goodness of the persistence of that mood.

Theism, on James’s view, is thus functional for something that we as organisms both can, do, and should prefer, even though we don’t necessarily, or by default. And I should note that while James typically talks extensively about God, analytically and descriptively speaking, any cosmological or ontological view that includes a wider being, or a wider system, engaging the higher interests we identify in ourselves, would fit this bill of awakening the strenuous mood. We can, then, expand James’s notion of theism significantly.

⁵This is a belief that James will, eventually, seek to justify with his defense of the right to believe.

16.1.2 *Religion from the Standpoint of Psychology*

With this turn to the strenuous mood, we are already into the territory of psychology. Indeed in James’s thought, the psychological perspective, like the evolutionary, physiological frame, is never remote from view. One might conclude that James’s forays into the conceptual meaning of religion are routinely if not always informed by the point of view of the psychologist. This is so for James, I would point out, not because psychology has a superior perspective on thinking than philosophy, or because philosophy will ultimately reduce to psychology, as some today seem to think. Instead, for James philosophy needs to understand thought according more to the adaptive frame that psychology has accepted and elaborated. And, philosophy also needs to think more thoroughly through the perspective of the individual’s particular experience, which psychology in his day presumed. The distinction is subtle, and perhaps not particularly precise as I’ve rendered it today. But seeing the relative values of both philosophy and psychology in regard to the truths we can frame about human thought and life is crucial to understanding what James is about.

Most of James’s observations on the psychology of religion occur, not surprisingly, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, a text in which he introduces himself as working from that perspective. Psychology is, not coincidentally, the field in which his reputation was best established when he wrote those lectures. But as I have been suggesting, James’s thinking about religion wasn’t only stimulated by or contained within *Varieties*. As several distinctive and important pieces of his view of religion nonetheless do appear there, however, let me turn briefly to the arc of that argument to enlarge what we take James to understand about religion.

First off, I want to note that I have little—perhaps even nothing—to hinge onto James’s famous twenty-eight word definition of religion. The definition, James notes, was “arbitrary” and given only for the purposes of arranging the case material James sought to consider in his lectures.⁶ (It is there that he infamously limits himself to “individual men in their solitude” in relation to whatever they consider the “divine.”) What I do want to attend to, however, are several claims about religion James forwards in the text. Two of these concern the psychological function of religion in the individual, and the third concerns the role of religion with regard to the social development of humanity, a point most readers overlook. Beyond these I will make one further observation about a metaphysical dimension James thinks the psychological facts suggest. And then I will turn to James’s later writings.

Varieties includes twenty lectures given as his Gifford courses on natural theology. With Lord Gifford’s interest in mind, and his own plan to begin with psychology, James subtitled his book “A study in human nature.” The first ten lectures comprise a survey not of the full variety of religious experience, but rather of a limited number of kinds of religious temperaments, ordered to support a study of

⁶“Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us *the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to the divine.*” James 1902, 34.

personality transformation, with religious transformation particularly in view. Although James certainly does not think that all religious experience is transformational, or even more narrowly that only conversion counts as religious experience, it is nonetheless the case that James thinks something particularly important about religion can be found in looking at conversion, or transformation.

In his second lecture James sets out some features of religion that pertain widely to persons who class themselves as religious. Most notable among these is the fact that, in contrast to morality, religion “makes easy and felicitous what in any case is necessary.” Religion becomes, James elaborates, “an essential organ of our life, performing a function which no other portion of our nature can successfully fulfill” (James 1902, 49). The context for this comment is a discussion of the feeling of happiness, even under duress, that those who are religious almost uniformly exhibit. This might suggest religious martyrs going to their deaths, in extreme cases, but it indicates just as well the more ordinary, daily sort of attitude that James himself has in view. James finds that the ability to generate this positive orientation, with or without the immediate personal interest, is part of what makes religion so distinctive, and so important. In this context James suggests that “religion on the whole . . . [is] the most important of all human functions.”

This claim is obviously extravagant, but it is also, I want to suggest, telling of a tiering of value in James’s considered estimation (*ibid*; see also James [1900] 1920, 2:127).

This felicity feature of religion might be read in a strictly utilitarian or hedonistic framework; certainly in that context it would make sense and have value. But James the descriptive psychologist, and James the ethical philosopher, sees it in a different light. From those vantages, the generation of religious emotion provides an adaptive value that James sees as functional individually and, by extension, socially. James, I should note, does not think that religious happiness is distinctive as a form of happiness, or that the religious function as an organ is somehow separate from the rest of our capacities (as some, such as Proudfoot 1987 suggest). Instead, religious emotions are just ordinary feelings combined distinctively with a religious object. Or put another way, religious states are distinguished not so much by the unique capacities of the human being that they involve, but rather by the combination of those capacities functionally into a distinctive intentional frame, with respect to an understanding of self and reality.

If this affective, attitudinal adaptation is also distinctive of religiousness, along with the strenuous mood previously noted, it is crucial to note further that James does not think that religion is limited to the mere conceptual and affective awakening of these functions. And here I come to the second psychological point to glean from *Varieties*. I mentioned that James pays an extraordinary amount of attention to the phenomenon of transformation, which in some religious traditions (certainly those James knew best) goes under the guise of conversion. And although the rising action of his text is to do with a range of types of personalities and conversions, and the climax (at least in the first course/ten lectures) concerns sudden involuntary conversion, James’s interest in religious conversion is not actually in the most extreme case. Rather, what James is really stalking is dynamic personality

reorganization, whether it is methodically achieved over months or years, or instantaneously undergone. James sees the ability of human beings to undergo transformations of the "centers of their personal energies," or to undergo changes to the longstanding habits that organize their daily energies, activities and commitments, as critical for human flourishing. (James 1902, 162). We might go as far as to say that for James all religion is somehow indexed to what religion does in relation to human feeling, action and habit.⁷

Religion, which he at one point describes as one's "total reaction on life," is not all that different in conceptual scope from philosophy, at least not philosophy as James describes it in *Pragmatism*: there, you may recall, he notes that everyone has a philosophy, and the most important thing to know about someone, for a landlady for example, is his or her philosophy.

So religion, like philosophy, fundamentally involves a world-view. Except that religion, James thinks, is more psycho-dynamic, more fundamentally motivating of affect and conduct, and more transformative of who we, individually and collectively, are. And that's where *Varieties*' interest in transformation comes in.

Psychologically speaking, then, religion not only involves the felicity feature, and it is not only determinative and re-determinative of conduct and one's outlook on life. Even more, religion, or religious experience, is typified by a conviction quotient, by which I mean that religious experiences and religious transformations, at least, convince their subjects of the rightness, the reality, and sometimes the "truth" of what they otherwise disclose or involve.

James writes at length about the reality of the unseen in *Varieties*, noting that religious objects seem irrefutably real. Claims about them, or their noetic deliveries, also seem remarkably true to their subjects. This sense of reality is, for James, a feeling analogous to the sentiment of rationality, something he had written about more than two decades before, and to which he returns in his later writings in the guise of intimacy. But crucially, where philosophical discussions ride on our sentiment of rationality, religious transformations depend more heavily on the sentiment of reality. And that sentiment is, James observes, more unimpeachable, more compelling, more driving of conviction than is our rational sense. No one, James writes hyperbolically, has ever been converted religiously on the basis of an argument (James 1902, 345, 353). But many have adopted particular "religious philosophies," world-views and paradigms of action on the basis of religious experience, and thus many have been transformed, in thought, feeling, and action. Philosophy may be distinguished by being focused on truth. But religion moves, motivates and orders human lives and behaviors. And that, really, is why James gives it such attention.

I mentioned earlier that I would have little to say about James's restriction to the individual experience in his *Varieties*' definition. But before I move to my last bit on James's view, I do want to rebut one misconception about that restriction with regard to religion's social contribution. I do so not to defend James's methodology, but rather to bring out an important point about his religious psychology. When

⁷Proudfoot (1987) *Religious Experience*.

James comes to detail the features of the post-transformation religious life, which he categorizes as saintliness. James finds that there is more delivered there than just the individual personality characteristics he noted earlier. Put simply, in addition to felicity and conviction, James sees religion, periodically, to deliver novelty to the world at the social level that otherwise would not be generated. The various world-views of differing religions are themselves these sorts of novelties, and many of them are fruitful or determinative in relation to action. But in an implicit rebuttal of claims like the axial-age thesis, James claims that religious saints and religious geniuses can sometimes, by virtue of their religiosity, be “genuinely creative social force[s].” The saints are “authors, *auctores*, increasers of goodness,” he writes, and their contributions themselves, such as the ideal of self-sacrifice, are true novelties (James 1902, 349). In light of the twentieth century, we might enliven James’s listing here with contributions like those of non-violence, as brought into play by Mohandas Ghandi and Martin Luther King.

16.1.3 *Meliorism and Religion*

I want to pass on now to my final aspect of James’s view of religion, namely, religion’s role in his broader melioristic and pluralistic philosophy. In *Pragmatism*, published in 1907, James begins to characterize his overall view with the descriptor of “meliorism.” By saying pragmatism is melioristic, James means to elaborate and accentuate some of the particular, human-inclined details of his adaptive, evolutionary view which I’ve noted. He also is developing a view that dovetails with the pluralistic metaphysical notions he adumbrates in his essays on radical empiricism, which I’ve treated elsewhere but left out here. In the last chapter, titled “Pragmatism and Religion,” James states that ‘meliorism’ is a doctrine that stands midway between optimism (e.g.: Hegelianism) and pessimism (e.g., Schopenhauer), two attitudes James find widespread in his day. “Meliorism treats salvation neither as necessary, nor as impossible,” he writes. “It treats it as a possibility, which becomes more and more of a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become” (James 1907, 285-6).

Meliorism involves factual determinations, as well as some metaphysical conclusions, about reality, or the environment we find ourselves in. Specifically, the world as we find it is presumed to be both open to change, and open to novelty, as well as relatively neutral, if not congenial, to at least some of our interests and aspirations. James usually puts this directly with regard to the compatibility of us and the world. But we might be inclined instead to follow the evolutionary pattern he engaged overtly in his early writing, and note that we and the world have developed in tandem. It is thus not surprising that we find the world open to at least some of our interests.

James’s meliorism presumes this factual situation, but then turns to the “moral” aspect, attending not merely to novelty and change, but also to possible actions leading to improvements in our situation, *vis à vis* our ideal interests. Meliorism

presumes that the world can be changed for the better, where 'better' is indexed to our notions of the good. These notions are themselves built up from human interest, but worked out in social and collective terms. And, crucially for James the individual-attuned psychologist and philosopher, meliorism also attends to our attitudes and feelings with respect to that good, both as motivations and ends. Thus James frames meliorism in terms of "salvation," and unites it to the history and scope of religion.

James's turn to meliorism and religion at the end of *Pragmatism* is rhetorically complicated, since he is juggling both the question of what "pragmatism" orients towards, and what broader possibilities there might be for interpreting the pluralistic situation we find ourselves in. What I'm indicating isn't comprehensive of the complexity of his treatment. But I do want to note that James is making the argument that it is pragmatically plausible that working towards better ends—morally, politically and religiously—is not only warranted, but is also in some sense capable of delivering its own rewards. These rewards are not only potentially realistic successes, but also are emotional fulfillments. In *Pragmatism* James frames this only in terms of salvation. But less than two years later in *A Pluralistic Universe*, James annexes other notions. There, in his final chapter, having discussed the complex epistemological, psychological and metaphysical questions of the continuity of consciousness, James re-introduces the example of transformative religious experiences, something he hadn't mentioned in *Pragmatism*.

The religious experiences James has in view in *A Pluralistic Universe* are a subset of the types identified in *Varieties*. But in 1909 he is interested in them for different argumentative reasons. In 1902 James had sought to justify the value of religion *in toto* as a human function via analysis of transformative experiences. In 1909, by contrast, having focused philosophically on how to understand the continuity of experience in his Hibbert Lectures, James turns to a subset of transformative experiences as potential data for his religiously collaborative, melioristic interpretation of reality. Specifically, James argues that the experience of new life succeeding where none had been imagined, or "new ranges of life succeeding on our most despairing moments," may at minimum indicate that we each are continuous not only with our own consciousness, but also, at least potentially, we may be continuous with a wider self, or a wider consciousness. (James 1909b, 303, 305) This wider self was mentioned in the conclusion to *Varieties* (James 1902, 505). But here, James connects it both with a re-fashioned idea of God-as-superhuman consciousness, and the notion of a collaborative co-creation, between us and that consciousness. Meliorism, then, becomes a social endeavor among humans and superhuman consciousnesses. And religion becomes more than just a psychological or subjective dynamic in James's view. Although James's argument is at best only suggestive, we can see James connecting a particular kind of religious experience and action with the pursuit, morally and actively, of the collective human good. Thus we see James concluding not only for the affective or subjective value of religion in provoking moods, motivations, and attitudes (to reference Geertz 1973, 90); but more, we see James arguing metaphysically that religion, properly understood, might itself be congenial to a philosophical pragmatic world-view that is human-centered, but not reductively humanist in any narrow sense.

16.2 II

I have now *accelerando*-ed far beyond what one probably should for a session in an Institute for Philosophy and Religion, bringing many elements of a brilliant thinker's complex view of human life and religion into an hour's sketch, and connecting them quickly, without adequate detail or argument. But the task I set, of sketching James's view on religion, isn't quickly done, and so I have erred on the side of surveying the chief contours, rather than zooming in on a single topographical feature. James's view of religion is multifaceted and pluralistic, both in its elaboration and justification, as well as in how he thinks it functions. If you were to take only one point away, I hope it is that James saw it as possible to understand and situate religion philosophically almost fully within the adaptive, evolutionary, environmental modern frame within which we otherwise understand reality, human experience, and our moral projects. Thus I am suggesting that the limitation to a study of human nature penned on the front of *Varieties* is actually a full-scale limitation for James. But importantly, James does not think this limitation is in any deep sense reductive of the significance of religiosity, or the religious life. Some may beg to differ on this; but James himself would I think contend that he has not taken an unduly reductive stance. I want to turn to the other two tasks I laid out at the beginning—tasks pertaining to this year's Institute theme. The first of these tasks involves what James himself thought about the future of religion. Instead of really reading the tea leaves here, I will trust that I have defended the notion that James took religion both to be deeply human, and significantly important to other (though not necessarily all) human enterprises. James's complex view of religion maps how religion functions in ways that can prove productively adaptive for us, from animating our strenuous moods, to generating new motivations for our own continued life energies, to funding broader social ideals directly, and animating large masses in their direction. He also has space to understand religion as problematic. James considered religious energies to be deeply human, but not necessarily unique in a pure sense. I take it that he thought religion not only had been, but would continue to be a major force, individually and socially.

Interestingly, James makes an observation in *Pragmatism*, when he is discussing common sense, that some common ideas (like the subject-object distinction), while now known to be problematic, are too embedded in our world-views ever to give way to preferable or even different ways of speaking, despite what philosophy or science finds. I have a sense that James thought something similar for religion, even though he had a largely positive view of it at its best. A person might, for example, at one point find religion conceptually inadequate and behaviorally un compelling. But then, unexpectedly, new life might supervene where the stream of experience led to expectations of none, and then a distinctive happiness, some commitment, and some intentionality might begin and wind up being framed religiously. Or perhaps, in a case with less intensity, someone might consider various religious world-views, and their distinctive models of human flourishing, and then find awakening within them the strenuous mood, leading them to turn towards such an orientation

and its way of making the world, and the communities that are organized around that world-view. In such ways, James seems to think, religious practice, orientation, and innovation is apt continually to come.

James was a progressive concerning knowledge and human life. Correspondingly, he seems to have expected that religious ideas would continue to transform along with changes in context. James would, I think, find it curious that both scholars of religion and religious persons alike have in striking numbers now a century later given up on this progressive set of expectations about the continuing, productive evolution of religious traditions. What I mean is that scholars have come to more often than not come to view religion as someone else’s, as an external object of study rather than also a collective enterprise, however much of a different perspective one might have. And many of those who are responsible within religious traditions have also taken up more retrospective, traditional stances, rather than actively and overtly embracing the demand to innovate and adapt to the present and future in their reasonings, expressions, and developments of religious identity. James would, I expect, likely be historicist with regard to our time, perhaps reminding us that all human thought is habitual and innovative at the same time, while looking to context to explain these shifts. In any case, I doubt that these swings of the pendulum likely would have led James to alter his estimation of religion’s importance.

James wrote to Henry William Rankin in 1896 that, like his father before him, he could not call himself a Christian, in part because he did not want to close off any realities by engaging “any definite symbols that might be too restrictive” (James 2000, 8:123). As such, James indicated his open, deeply pluralistic and appreciative stance towards the religious in its varieties. James was, he says elsewhere, never a “joiner,” and this was true as much in philosophy as in politics or religion. The future James foresaw, of a world continually spiritual, but perhaps less strictly religious in tradition-bound terms, was doubtless something he welcomed. History has in part delivered on that, at least in America—a fact I am reminded of routinely when I talk with current college students about their attitudes about organized religions versus spirituality. Many of my students identify as spiritual but not religious, even when they state their identities in relation to standard religious traditions. Some are clearly agnostic or avidly non-religious. James would not have expected anything different than that for America’s religious future, for after all, tolerance was one of the key undergirding progressive social values in James’s view. Indeed, his expectation seems to have been that the practice of religious tolerance would lead to more pluralistic understandings. The facts have been ambivalent with regard to that future.

16.3 III

But what should we think about the future of religion, informed by James but situated in our present? This question is, I take it, the most germane to the organizing theme of the Institute this year. I can only be brief about these observations, and I

offer them in hopes of stimulating discussion. I will make four points, the first about religion's recalcitrance, the second about theism, the third concerning religion's social importance, and the fourth about the need to engage religion substantively.

Religion's Recalcitrance James's view on the neurology and psychology of religion, and its role in relation to our "energies," or put more generally, its adaptive role within our evolutionary history, is something that, particularly in philosophy, theory of religion, and theology, we need to take more seriously. (It's rewarding to make this comment at BU, where you in fact do this far more than most.) Contemporary neuroscientific work on religion, and work in cognitive science and consciousness studies more generally, has revised most of the details James had in view, as has work in evolutionary biology. But they have also importantly buttressed a number of his key insights about consciousness, thought, experience, and affectivity in particular. By extension of these analyses, these fields promise important insights into where religious experience, behavior and ideation fit. There are a number of things we want to know here, and only a few are currently being studied. But one conclusion seems obvious: religion is neither merely an "early and indirect form of self-knowledge," as Feuerbach put it ([1843] 1881, 13), nor something alongside magic that is opposed to and separate from science as Malinowski suggested ([1925] 1948). Nor is it well understood simply as a cultural product. The point is that religion's functions cannot just simply be replaced by the knowledge fruits of "real" psychology, "real" science, or history. Religion may, and likely should, involve all these things. But it is also a deeply embedded and complex set of dynamics in us as human animals. As such, it is not only structured socially via language and practice into our ways of behaving, thinking, and determining action; it is also, perhaps like our self-consciousness, wired neurologically into the ways we most basically, but dynamically, are.

If, informed by the contours of this kind of view, we look to the future, we should expect that religion is not going away. James himself perceived individuals to vary in temperament and capacities; he never concluded that all were religious, or even that those who were would be so in the same ways. I take it that the increasing number of professed atheists and "Nones" in the recent 2012 Pew study, or the Harvard senior survey last spring, which reported 38% of graduating students as agnostic or atheist (Robbins et al. 2014), or the changing dynamics of adherence to religious traditions, would come as no surprise to James. But the idea that humans will adapt beyond religion is far less probable, given the complex involvement of affective, cognitive, moral and metaphysical dimensions that James's analyses suggest, and other findings in mind-brain science, just to name one field, has come to thus far. Humans won't likely adapt beyond religion because religion is now a part of human nature, even though it wasn't always. It's not that we couldn't evolve beyond it. But there is no reason to think we will, at least not anytime soon. For religion does a lot.

Theism One might ask a similar question about theism: from James's perspective should we think theism will endure? From his early to his late writings, James continued to see theistic ideas and commitment to theism in practice as animating our

means of acting on, and thinking about, our ideals in more unified and ascending ways. Early on James defends theism as involving the belief that our interests are shared by a power greater than us in the universe, and he observes that such a belief offers direct benefits. In his later writings, informed by his study of religious experiences in their *variety*, James is more taken by how theism plays out in the felt sense. Interestingly, James's own focus over time shifts from attending to the ideal God, who in a demanding way brings out the strenuous mood, to the ally God, whom some experience as collaborating with them and making them more generative, effective and good. The difference is subtle, but notable: one is led by conceptual reflection, the other by concrete experience. Notably, after *Varieties* James thinks we can even do, conceptually, with a (merely) superhuman ally, rather than the all powerful, omni-omni God of the philosophers and some religious traditions. Also notably, James shifts away from ontological language of the "supernatural," focusing instead on powers beyond the individual. That proposal is motivated by the rational need to pull God into conceptual consistency with our pluralistic world, while still responding to the various religious and conceptual needs that led us to God in the first place. Such revisionist theological notions had some purchase in the 20th century, particularly in liberal Christianity.

But it is unclear, from James's vantage, how compelling the need for theoretical consistency will prove, as over against other human motives. Certainly James's superhuman, finite God is possible, conceptually, if only on Durkheimian assumptions. But consistency, as Emerson noted, isn't always our strongest motive.⁸

Religion's Social Importance Thinking about James's notion of God as an ally, and about religion's social dimensions, puts James into a frame that is a bit more consistent with the last decades' trends in the study of religion, which are heavily inflected by social, contextual and historical analyses. James's view, as he worked it out, is, I should simply note, far less developed on the social side than one needs. This is in part due to his intellectual context. But if we want to look out to our present from James's view, it's not hard to make the move--and even to understand why we need to make the move--to bring in more fully the social dimensions. If James is right about how central, and how dynamic, religion is for individuals at minimum, then there is little reason to think that religion will decrease in social importance in the future. If anything, I think one might have fairly easily have predicted from James's pluralistic perspective that the increasing problem for societies as they continue to connect and modernize might be one of tolerance. Based on his non-reductive stance on religion, there is no reason to think that there are simple ways beyond the differences that emerge in cultures and among societies, as well as among individuals. And so, while James encourages us to attend to the role of religion in individual lives, this should not be to the detriment, or reduction, of attention to the social register. James would only insist that we not lose the individual's

⁸"A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds," 1841, 47. C.f.:, James's comments about the plural and competing forms of rationality in *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909b).

experiential and affective perspective (which some socially informed analyses do), and that we continue to attend to our increasingly common goods.

Engagement Turning to the social register brings me to my final point today in thinking about the future and religion from the perspective of James's philosophical view, and that is a point about the importance of mutual engagement, and the value of philosophy in relation to religion. It is not by happenstance that James ended his last two series of philosophical lectures, those of *Pragmatism* and *A Pluralistic Universe*, on the topic of religion. Each of those attends to the importance of religion: the latter to the importance in the individual's experience, and the former to religion's importance socially, as mediated through the conception of meliorism.

James took religion not only to be a powerful force in individual and social life, but also to be a powerful force for advancing human goods. One thing we should take seriously, as we conclude reflecting on James's view tonight, is his strong demand on *philosophy* to take on issues of religion, in our current present and towards our future. If thought is a form of action, a continual means of prodding and intervening in our own adaptations, and religion is one means of negotiating and delivering goods, individually and socially, then thinking carefully about religion is not only defensible, but more and more needed. We might do well to consider that as we think about philosophy and the future of religion.

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Chapter 17

God and the Ambivalence of Being



Jean-Luc Marion

Abstract Before one can decide whether to think of God as either with or without Being [l'être], one should ask what kind of "Being" is under consideration. As understood by the tradition of *metaphysica*, Being amounts to a perseverance that not only eventually annuls itself in the aporia of the present moment, but must also forget its own process of manifestation and its future and past – beings *are* according to *causa sui*. But one can also understand Being according to the logic of the *gift* and the *event*. In this other mode of Being, beings *are* precisely by surrendering their claim to perseverance in the present, such that the future and past, as well as manifestation itself, can enter into presence alongside the passing present moment. This other mode of Being can be seen in the example of Jesus Christ, who perfectly implemented it as son in relation to God the father. This infinitive "Being" thus expresses an ambivalence: one can say it either from the point of view of *metaphysica*, or from the point of view of God.

Keywords Being · Ambivalence · Gift · Event · Presence

1.

In 1986, a few months before his death in 1987, Dominique Dubarle O.P. agreed to allow Jean Greisch to bring together five studies (published between 1969 and 1981) with the title, *Dieu avec l'être*, in the collection "Philosophie" from the Institut Catholique. As he was writing the preface for this publication, Jean Greisch had, at the time, asked me politely if I would have any objection at all to this title. Aside from my friendship with and admiration for Dominique Dubarle, I would, in any event, not have had any objection; because, even if the allusion to my own book, *Dieu sans l'être* (published in 1982) appeared quite clear, and even if certain people believed otherwise, there was, in fact, in the title chosen for this collection "...no polemical intention." (Greisch 1986, 5) Beyond this good reason, I had another reason for approving the title of this work, and this reason had to do with the aim

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made clear in its subtitle: to attempt not an ontology (even *ancilla theologiae*, in the service of theology), but a *theological* [*théologique*] ontology. In effect, more important than the inversion of the prepositions (from *with* to *without*), the addition of this adjective—one very rarely used, moreover—brought up a completely different, more subtle and crucial question: when it is a question of God, must not the very question of Being, in popular parlance, the question of ontology, also receive a new qualification? Dubarle was asking the question, and he answered in his own fashion: showing how, in particular in Saint Augustine, the multiple meanings of Being underwent a reinterpretation according to the needs of revealed theology. Neither *essentia*, nor *esse ipsum*, the name of the One who is what *Is* for Saint Augustine; neither *essentia*, nor the *ens commune*, nor yet the *ipsum esse* of an eventual “metaphysics of Exodus,” but the act that is “impenetrable” which we find in Saint Thomas Aquinas. These answers certainly did not correspond to my own answer in *God without Being* – God radically outside of Being, with the name of ἀγάπη – but the question remained common to both of us: if by chance it happens that, since *Exodus* 3:14, the question of God cannot be asked or even understood without there being some relation, enigmatic and perhaps disturbing, to the *Seinsfrage* [question of Being], at least we can say that what we shall ultimately be able to understand by Being, sought after for so long but never found by philosophy following Aristotle (up to Heidegger), will, in any event, have to be looked for in a different direction, even one that is absolutely distinct from what metaphysics has believed itself capable of saying about it and doing with it, from Duns Scotus to Nietzsche. The question of “theological ontology” [“*ontologie théologique*”], and even – because Dubarle went so far in his commentary on Saint Augustine – of a “*Christic ontology*” [“*ontologie christique*”] (Dubarle 1986, 172), cannot in any way be avoided. In other words, when it is a question of God, what do we understand by Being? With what ambivalence does the plurality of the meanings of Being (according to Aristotle and thematised by Brentano in 1862) redouble itself when it is a question of God? If we fail to identify this ambivalence correctly, does not the debate between God *with* or *without* Being risk sinking into insignificance? Let us try, therefore, to take a few steps in this direction.

2.

The question does not consist in the application of the predicate of Being to God, as if it were simply a matter of discussing his existence or of claiming to show it, and this without questioning for a moment that the verb, *to exist*, or the substantive, *existence*, could legitimately be applied in one way or another to God: in short, as if it were simply a matter of accepting as if it went without saying that, before all else, God would have to be. The real question, or rather the main difficulty, consists first in determining what it is that one understands by Being in general, then most importantly in measuring the relevance (if not the sense) that it might still have when one refers it to something like God.

However, if one persists in wanting to link God *directly* and without precondition to Being, ambiguities and imprecisions arise and pile up at once as so many symptoms of the impropriety of Being when it comes to God, even its vulgarity. Let us look at the principal ones.

First of all, the imprecision of knowing whether the answer to the question of Being could come from a being. What is Being? If one answers this question, “God” (“God is Being”, “Being is God”), is one not inadequately making some being, or being in general, correspond to Being? Is one not thus failing to recognise head-on the ontological difference? That one might qualify this being as supreme (*summum ens, ens entium, ens supremum*) does nothing but *reinforce* the inadequate nature of the answer to the question, by underlining, through the quality of a purely ontic transcendence, that one understands nothing more at all in the question of Being itself, that one forgets it in substituting an ontic answer. What do we say of Being when we answer its question with the word, “God?” We get a being or nothing, some thing or no thing. Hence the first failure to answer: being is substituted for Being, attesting to the *ontological* deficit of the answer “God” in regard to Being.

Looking from the other direction, what are we really saying about God when we answer the question about God with the word “Being”? What are we saying about God when we say of him, without further precision or precaution, that he *is*? Everything in the world *is*: humans, animals, plants and stones, stars and particles, even those gods who died with the Great Pan and who were surely, for some people, beings. In what way can saying that he is the being that *is* tell us anything at all about what *may be* [soit] of God in his divinity? And if this God were to have come among us, in the person of Jesus Christ, to make us divine by loving us and instructing us in how to love, in what way can the fact of his Being (and of Being and nothing more, like us) teach us anything at all that *may be* of the love and the divinity that is shown there? And if, by happenstance and through hypothesis, Being were to be sufficient for us to approach, if not to enunciate, the divinity of God, it would still be necessary for us to know what it is that makes *this* Being, *this* mode of Being, adequate to his divinity – and adequate to the divinity of love. But if, as the system of *metaphysica* has not ceased to postulate from Duns Scotus to Hegel, Being constitutes the most abstract and the most perfectly empty determination because it extends the most universally, how could it define the divinity of God as such? Nothing divine can come to us from the equivalence, loudly claimed by *metaphysica*, that re-covers that which is, being in general and nullity itself. Hence the second failure to answer: the fact of Being offers nothing that nullity itself cannot do in terms of access to the divinity of God; it thus misses the divinity of God, for it misses *divinity* in regard to God.

To no surprise, it is certainly true that no theologian saw these defects as clearly as Saint Thomas Aquinas. We recognize the incomprehensibility of God in his essence and that his essence can be summarized as the *esse* in act: it follows that the *esse* remains incomprehensible: “...sicut Dei substantia ignota, ita et esse.” (Aquinas 1953, q.7 a.2 *ad* 1 m) At the very least, if God *is Being*, in whatever way this is understood, the *esse* in question will, precisely because it is divine, remain “profoundly unknown – *penitus incognitum*” (Aquinas 1926, ch.49) according to Thomas Aquinas himself; in other words, we do not have available to us any concept (*quidditatis*) that might make comprehensible to us the *ipsum esse* of the *actus essendi*, whereas we do have, in fact and by right, an immediate apprehension of the *ens commune* (that will become soon a *conceptus entis*): “...esse dupliciter dicitur:

uno modo significat actus essendi; alio modo significat compositionem propositionis, quam anima adinvenit conjunguens praedicatum subjecto. Primo igitur modo accipiendo esse, non possumus scire esse Dei sicut nec ejus essentiam, sed solum secundo modo" (Aquinas 1888, q.3 a.4 ad 2 m); it follows that so much as the predicative composition remains intelligible to us, so much the divine act of Being will never become so: "...hoc intelligitur de esse, quo Deus in se ipso subsistit, quod nobis quale sit ignotum est, sicut ejus essentia –... Being, through which God subsists – what it could be, that remains as unknown to us as his essence" (Aquinas 1918, ch.12). Either God is a being, ultimately comprehensible through a concept, but then it cannot indicate Being (the first, *ontological* defect); or else God would ultimately indicate Being as such, but then he would remain in principle unknowable – and this *esse* just as well. And this, for at least two reasons: because God would not be worthy of the title of God if he did not remain by definition incomprehensible to a finite understanding (following the Augustinian principle that "If you understand it, it is not him")¹; and because Being cannot be conceived through an ontic concept, since the concept only reaches in clear and distinct representation precisely this or that being (with respect to the ontico-ontological difference, undoubtedly as Thomist as it is Heideggerian).

Ontology itself, understood in the historical sense of *metaphysics* (the only precise sense, and the one that we shall hold to exclusively here), has never claimed to give access *as such* not only to God, but even to the question of God. By all evidence, in calling for a *theological* ontology Dominique Dubarle was fully aware of this. He was thus clearly calling into question, implicitly but radically, the strange affirmation accepted, without any proof and as evident, by Suarez in the "Proemium" to the *Disputationes metaphysicae*: "...[as] these metaphysical dogmas intervene in the discussion of the divine mysteries, and without the knowledge and the intelligence of them these higher mysteries can only scarcely or not even scarcely be worthily treated (*vix, aut ne vix quidem pro dignitate tractari*), I have often been forced [...] to mix inferior [i.e. metaphysical] questions with divine and supernatural things [...]. Because metaphysical principles and truths form such a whole (*ita cohaerent*) with theological reasonings and conclusions that, if one takes away the science and the perfect knowledge of the former, necessarily the knowledge of the latter will also completely collapse (*si illorum scientia ac perfecta cognitio auferatur, horum etiam scientiam nimium labefactari necesse sit*)" (Suarez 1866, 1). Would thought of God then *necessarily* rest upon what *metaphysica* can say about Being, could it not "even scarcely, *ne vix quidem*" dispense with [*metaphysica*]? Should *theology* always conceive of itself as a metaphysico-theology? Is it necessary to resolutely ignore Athenagoras' warning to "...learn the things of God starting from God – παρὰ Θεοῦ περὶ Θεοῦ μαθεῖν" (Athenagoras 1990, 34; ch.7) or more modestly Nietzsche's statement that "...Christ stands outside all metaphysics" (Nietzsche 1970, 406; 11 [368])? To answer this question, we shall have to answer,

¹ See "Sermon 117" Ch.3, 5 at Augustine (1863), 663. But also "Sermon 52" Ch.6, 16 at Augustine (1863), 360: "Si enim quod vis dicere, capisti, non est Deus: si comprehendere potuisti, cogitatione tua decepisti. Hoc ergo non est si comprehendisti: si autem hoc est, non comprehendisti."

even if briefly, two other questions. First of all, what does *metaphysica* say about Being? Then, what can theology have to say about Being? – if theology can say something about it, at least, and if that something is something *other*.

3.

What is it that *metaphysica* establishes about the Being of beings? What does it teach us about the mode of Being of beings, including the *ens supremum*? Initially, the question seems to have no answer. Or, to put it more exactly, the answer seems to be empty. First of all, because the question of knowing what Being means is not asked, inasmuch as the answer goes without saying: “In the present disputation, the question is therefore to explain what the *ens in quantum ens* is; for that the being is is so well known that it calls for no other statement” (Suarez 1866, 64). But if the fact *that* the being is has nothing in the way of “wonder” (to use Heidegger’s term), is it necessary to conclude that the very definition of the *ens in quantum ens* goes without saying? In one sense, yes: it is a question of a concept that, “applied to fixed beings insofar as they are such and such, [remains] vague and indistinct in the representation (*confusus et indistinctum in repraesentendo*) of this or that being” (Suarez 1866, 67). In effect, it represents no being in particular (for that, only the concept of the essence of this being would be appropriate), but its very vagueness and indistinctness allow it to reach the *ens ut sic*, beinghood as such, through pure abstraction, i.e. through pure representation (therefore without the presentation of the slightest being in particular): “For the mind takes on all of these things solely insofar as they are similar to one another under the reason of being (*solum ut inter se similia in ratione essendi*), and, as such, the reason of being forms an image through a single formal representation representing what is (*unica representatione formali repraesentantem id quo est*), and that image is the formal concept [of being] itself” (Suarez 1866, 69). In other words, the concept of the being (and, let us underscore this once again, it is no longer a question of Being) does not present the being as such, does not say *what* it is, but consists only in the representation of that which no particular being actually is, i.e. the being *ut sic*, the being as such, and this appears only as an unreal common point between all beings that are themselves things. The objective concept, the object of this concept, only consists in that which corresponds to this abstraction through representation, only in a pure and simple representation, empty of all reality: “The objective concept [of being] is nothing other than the object itself, insofar as it is known or represented by such a formal concept” (Suarez 1866, 70). This decision, that of the unreality of the objective concept of being, solely grounded in its representation through the formal concept of being, i.e. an abstraction of the mind, was to find its confirmation and its full expansion in the definition of the being that allowed Clauberg to establish *ontologia* as the metaphysical science par excellence: “*Ens est quicquid quovis modo est, cogitari ac dici potest. Alles was nur gedacht und gesagt werden kann* – being is everything that is, in any way that it might be, [everything that] can be thought and said” (Clauberg 1968, 283). In other words, the being *as such* is not, unless it is as

something that can be thought, *ens cogitabile*.² This decision, that in fact goes back to Goclenius and Timpler, allows us to understand why, as much in Wolff³ as in Baumgarten,⁴ the first (and the only) determination of the concept of being as such is summed up in non-contradiction: that a concept does not contradict itself constitutes in effect the primary condition of its possibility, in fact is its possibility itself, but solely from the point of view of its thinkability, precisely because it rests only on the thought that alone imposes it, insofar as it abstracts it from any real determination. The concept of being says nothing of the being (since it remains indeterminate, empty, universal in as much as it is vague), but it speaks in the name of representation, of the *cogitatio* of which it is the exclusive result. *Metaphysica* says nothing of the being, so that it ends up identifying it to nullity – the one and the other conceivable in the same way, as empty [à vide]. Hegel made the diagnosis in the opening to *The Science of Logic*. We shall hold to it.

Nevertheless, *metaphysica* does think the real nature of the being as being, at least when it defines what it names *substantia*. By *substantia*, *metaphysica* understands the most fully realized figure of the being: beyond the simple *cogitabile*, which encompasses nullity, the being of reason (*ens rationis*), universals, and the accident, *substantia* designates the *ens reale* par excellence that Spinoza, with his usual brutality and ambiguity, defines, without seeing the contradiction, as “...that which is in itself and that conceives itself through itself” (Spinoza, Id3).⁵ What would thus be the character [propre] of *substantia*? To remain in its being, to be through itself, without breaking down into accidents, nor passing thus from one mode to another; to resist corruption and therefore to escape genesis, to which Aristotle anchored it in the sub-lunary world (our own). In good logic, it is necessary to conclude that only one *substantia* merits its title, and this is God. Descartes, like many of the Scholastics, was not far from acknowledging this, and Spinoza did not hesitate to draw out the consequence. One substance subsists. Hobbes would have preferred to speak, in this case, of a body, but in order to better insist upon its subsistence: “[*corpus*]...*propter independentiam autem a nostra cogitatione*

²For a recent study see Savini (2001).

³Christian Wolff defines the being by possibility (Wolff 1730, §134: “*Ens dicitur, quod existere potest, consequenter cui existentia non repugnat*”), and bases possibility on the non-contradiction of thought: “*Eam experimur mentis nostrae naturam, ut, dum ea iudicat aliquid esse, simul iudicare nequeat, idem non esse*” (Wolff 1730, §27). Non-contradiction stems from an experience of the nature of the thinking mind, even prior to, and so as to define, the nature of the being.

⁴*Metaphysica* I,1 §8, in Baumgarten, 56: “nonnihil est ALIQUID: repraesentabile, quicquid non involvit contradictionem, non est A et non-A, est POSSIBILE”. Ce non-néant dépend donc du néant, lui-même défini par l'impossibilité épistémique de le penser: §7 “*Nihil negativum, irreprasentabile, impossibile, repugnans (absurdu) contradictionem involvens, implicans contradictorium, est A et non-A. [...] Haec propositio dicitur principium contradictionis, et absolute primum.*” Concerning the being, the absolute point of departure thus lies in a rule of the *cogitatio*, conforming to the principle of the *ens ut cogitabile*.

⁵“*Per substantiam intelligo id, quod in se est et oer se concipitur*” – this, without questioning the legitimacy of making the thought of the substance and its Being through itself coincide, which *ontology* radically disassociates.

subsistens per se; et propterea quod extra nos subsistit, existens". (Hobbes 1839, 91) In other words, *substantia* only unfolds itself strictly as *subsistence*; and, as subsistence implies subsistence *per se*, substance is only fully realized if it is *causa sui*. Spinoza, very logically, begins with this requirement.⁶

What is indicated to us by the passage from the being to the substance, and that from substance to subsistence? Subsistence only subsists in persisting. Spinoza insists upon the privilege of the unique substance because it alone can be *in se*, that is to say, remain in its Being without simply passing through it and seeing its Being pass; but every other figure of the being, the mode or even the *res* (a term that he leaves undetermined, but which allows him to find a denomination of the *ens* in general), are not except in the (incidentally weak) measure that they persist in Being. Being signifies persisting, therefore persevering in Being. To be, at least in the sense of *metaphysica*, signifies to persist, to perdure, to persevere: "*Unaquaeque res, quantum in se est, in suo esse perseverare conatur*" (Spinoza, IIIp6).⁷ In other words, for a being to be, it does not suffice for it to be in time, in one time and for a time; the accident and the *ens rationis* fulfill this, the *ens creatum* too, without truly Being, [and] as such a mode of Being only remains on condition, under a fixed-term contract; and yet Being demands remaining through itself, remaining in presence with all of the force of perseverance. Being is to remain here, to be able to claim that I am here and thus I remain here.

This perseverance in Being, through which substance is indebted to itself for subsisting, we shall call persistence in presence. Heidegger makes us understand that, from the outset, the Greeks themselves had interpreted οὐσία firstly, if not solely, as παρουσία, as if presence alone were to constitute the property [fonds propre] (the first signification of οὐσία) of the self of the thing, as if to have a property [fonds] implied owning it as one owns some good under the sun; or, inversely, as if this property alone were to come to unfold in presence, itself present only in as much as it were to make itself insistent and perseverant. But, still following Heidegger, we must go further: the interpretation of the self of presence as perseverance, such as it becomes radicalized in the *conatus in suo esse perseverandi*, implies above all that Being can only be thought as it arrives [advient] – according to time. The uncovering of essence, the *Anwesenheit*, makes itself available [se décline] temporally in reducing itself to persistence and insistence in presence. The essence, of οὐσία, makes itself insistent in presence, παρουσία. Kant calls this indiscrete insistence *Beharrlichkeit*, a presence that insists in order to endure as much as it can (*conatus perseverandi*). In order to truly be (ontologically, ὄντως εἶναι) in presence it is not enough just to appear in it, it is necessary still and always to remain there

⁶Spinoza, Id1: "Per causam sui, intelligo id, cujus essentiam involvit existentiam; sive id, cujus natura non potest concipi nisi existens." Besides the fact that once again the conception of the mind finds itself juxtaposed, without justification, with the Being of the thing, one observes that the *causa sui* takes over its definition from the argument called "ontological" in Descartes' *Meditation V*.

⁷Or Spinoza, IIIp7: "Conatus, quo quaeque res in suo esse perseverare conatur, nihil est praeter ipsius rei actualementiam."

and to situate oneself in it, to occupy it for oneself and eventually against the other claimants to its light: *Gegenwart* says nothing other than this. It is a question of mounting guard around *one's* own presence *against* those who would wish to come, in their turn, to occupy it. Against whom? Firstly, of course, against other beings with a claim to present existence, even a demand for it. But above all (and in order to explain this first resistance) it is to mount guard against the very process of appearing, against the *arising* to presence of another present still to come: once the edifice of its presence is accomplished, once its presence is assured in the present, each being withdraws the ladder and the scaffolding that made it arise there, not only in order to forbid access to beings that might follow, but in order to claim itself as without genesis, without genealogy, without another modality, ever, except effective presence, the only true precedence because it is without past possibility, without origin, in short finally and again *causa sui*. We must not make any mistake about what is signified by the multiform claim of the *causa sui* as the freedom of the finite being itself: Sartre was, with that contradictory demand to attribute the divine *causa sui* to man, only the perspicacious herald of the contemporary deliria around an unconditional autonomy of the supposedly autarkic individual. But, behind this ideological agitation (and underpinning it), we must read something more radical and ontological at stake: the interpretation of presence as persistence, of persistence as perseverance, of perseverance as possession of presence in the present indicates the refusal of the coming (and the departure) of presence itself in the process of phenomenalization. With the delirious drivings of the *causa sui* we see the refusal of the very phenomenality of presence, the denial of the dimensions of its process of its appearing, the censoring by presence itself of the unfolding of the arising to presence of the phenomenon. As if presence, nervous about its own insistence, were to burn its boats in order to forget its voyage towards itself, and force itself to remain on the ground henceforth conquered. As if it could re-cover the openness of its uncoveredness through covering, by means of the uncovered itself, the coming of its former uncovering. As if the present that is acquired, possessed, and claimed, could safeguard itself without the process of its uncoveredness and in order to re-cover it.

Now *metaphysica*, or at least what is resistant in it, i.e. philosophy itself in its critical mode, has shown that the pure and simple present, presence reduced to what we can know of the possession of the present, contradicts and dissolves itself. This was established by Aristotle and by Saint Augustine, and Hegel, Nietzsche (and Bergson) have confirmed it: presence can only be understood as a taking possession of the present by dissolving the present itself. For if Being is equivalent to temporalizing oneself, but if temporalizing oneself comes down to possessing what can possess itself in and from time, if it comes down to presence reduced to the present moment alone, then this present (and therefore the present Being that temporalizes itself there) "...either simply is not, or rather is only scarcely and obscurely - ἢ ὅλως οὐκ ἔστιν ἢ μόλις καὶ ἀμυδρῶς" (Aristotle 1831, 217b32–33). Time, reduced to the possession of the present, thus ultimately to the instant, has as its character only Being in the mode of not Being: "...ut scilicet non vere dicamus tempus est, nisi quia tendit in non esse," comments Saint Augustine at *Confessiones* XI, 14, 17 (Augustine 1962, 300). In effect, how is it possible to persevere in time, if time reduced to the

strict present does not last: for the present is not measured by a year, but is composed of months; and it is not measured by a month, if the month is divided into weeks; but the week only lasts in days that themselves only last hours, and the hours minutes, minutes seconds, seconds instants, and the instant extends towards the limit, that extends to nothing. As soon as the instant (the ultimate form of the possession of presence in the present) is here, the instant is no longer there. Saint Augustine develops the *aporia* and fixes it in a single word: not only “the present has no space —...*praesens nullum habet spatium*”, but it does not even have any duration: “...*nulla morula extendatur*” (Augustine 1962, 304).⁸ The present has no *mora*; hence what I have been able to call “...The *im-morality* of the present excludes it from presence, therefore from *παρουσία*, therefore from *οὐσία*” (Marion 2008, 282). Time gives precisely no time to time, nor presence to presence. Or, inversely, time does not have the means to assure presence, still less does it have the means to assure itself of presence, because it does not allow it to persevere there. Time, understood in the sense of taking possession of the present, proves itself therefore incapable of either assuring presence, or of receiving it, or of retaining it. The present, in the metaphysical sense of that in which the *conatus* would persevere, cannot give being.

Presence cannot possess itself because the present offers nothing to possess, since it dissolves away as soon as it appears. The present passes through loss and without profit. It passes through the lane, the passing lane [*la bande, la bande passante*]. We must not consider the presence of Being as that which is convenient to possess in the present, to say nothing of considering the Being of the present as by possession — οὐχ ἀπαγγμὸν ἡγήσατο τὸ εἶναι (Philippians 2:6).

4.

Before claiming to answer to this question, a question that is already strange enough that one wonders about its very formulation, it is appropriate to return to what has led us to this point.

The *aporia* of the presence of the being reduced to the possession of presence comes to us from metaphysics (through *metaphysica* in the strict historical sense, the only one operational). But it appears crucial only to a non-metaphysical reflection in philosophy. How far can this reflection enlighten us? To stay with what is essential, we shall give attention once again, but still going against certain bad habits, to a decisive analysis by Heidegger in his reading of *The Anaximander Fragment*. Commenting on the first line, no doubt added to the fragment itself by Simplicius, who quotes it — “But that whence is the genesis for things that are, into that occurs also their destruction according to necessity” —,⁹ Heidegger notes not so much the reciprocity (in fact Aristotelian) between genesis and corruption, but in fact that the

⁸From *Confessiones*, XI, 15, 20. It is not certain that Bergson gets out of this *aporia* in simply passing from time to duration — if duration itself does not last, nor possess itself; the passage from one word to another is without doubt not enough to think the passage itself of the passing present.

⁹See Diels, 89 (who translate the fragment: “Woraus aber das Werden ist den seienden Dingen, in das hinein geschieht auch ihr Vergehen nach der Schuldigkeit”). See the philological discussion summarized by Conche (whose translation we correct), which presents a more recent state of the

ὄντα “... render to themselves justice and reparation, between themselves, from one to the other, for their mutual injustice following the assignation of time.”¹⁰ In what sense could it be possible that an “injustice” arises between beings, and in what sense above all could this “injustice” have to do with time? Evidently because the being manifests itself and makes itself seen in presence by entering into the present and occupying it, and because this occupation, this desire to set itself up and persevere in the possession of the present commits an injustice towards the other beings, who remain waiting to accede, themselves and in their turn, to presence and who find themselves withheld precisely by the first occupant who perseveres in the present. The “this that presents itself in the present” remains in effect equivocal and ambivalent: “*Das Anwesende bleibt zweideutig*” (Heidegger 2003, 347). Ambivalent, but in what sense? In the sense that “τὰ ὄντα nennt *zweideutig* sowohl das gegenwärtig Anwesende, als auch das ungegenwärtig Anwesende, das, von jenem her verstanden, das Abwesende ist” (Heidegger 2003, 349). This ambivalence, crucial for Anaximander, we no longer understand, marked as we remain by *metaphysica*. For us, there only appear in the present beings that occupy the present and persevere in it, while the beings that are not yet present or already no longer present do not belong at all to presence. But for thought that is not yet or is already no longer metaphysical, the ambivalence of presence essentially expands it beyond and before the simple present. ‘Beings’ names here not only that which presents itself in the present by occupying it and persevering in it, but above all and to the same extent that which presents itself no longer or not yet in the present, but which, precisely because one does not understand solely on the basis of the present, is not simply absent, but rather always present in the way of the past or of the passing. Because that which presents itself (*das Anwesende*) presents itself at once and indissolubly as present there before us, and, in perfect ambivalence, as also not-present there before us, *das gegenwärtig und das ungegenwärtig Wesende*. “Auch das Abwesende ist Anwesendes und, *als* Abwesendes aus ihr, in die Unverborgenheit anwesend. Auch das Vergangene und das Zukünftige sind ὄντα. Demnach bedeutet εὖν: anwesend in die Unverborgenheit” (Heidegger 2003, 347).¹¹ Just as injustice consists of a being manifesting itself in presence in the metaphysical way of solely persevering in the occupation of the present, justice and reparation consist in not extending oneself, in not spreading oneself out in presence (*sich spreizen*), in not stiffening oneself there, nor hardening oneself there (nor *sich versteifen*), in short, it consists in not enduring there with all one’s force, persisting there (*beharren*) (Heidegger 2003, 355–6).¹² Justice between beings who pass into the present without embedding themselves there consists therefore in renouncing precisely what Kant understood by the name presence, and in renouncing the *Beharrlichkeit* – the Kantian name for presence, for

debate between the editors and interpreters on the beginning of the quotation of the same fragment of Anaximander, at Conche 161.

¹⁰ See Conche, 174ff, whose translation we follow here.

¹¹ In response it will, further, be a matter of a *zweifaches Abwesen*; see Heidegger (2003), 361.

¹² Also see Heidegger (2003), 257.

παρουσία – as the ultimate meaning of οὐσία: “We are so far from being able draw these properties [those of *fortdauern*, persevering] from the simple concept of a substance, that we must much rather draw the persevering of a given object from the ground of experience when we wish to apply to it the usable concept of a substance” (Kant 1903, A249).¹³ For Kant, one cannot admit any presence without an equal obstinacy in presence, without a persistence in the present, however contradictory that persistence may prove to be – as in the end external experience does not provide any persistence that is more immobile than internal experience: in the end, everything in the world *passes*, no matter the duration of the period of time of its passing. In response, Nietzsche offered a perfect critique of this “faith in the persistence of substance, i.e. in the remaining-*same* to itself of the Same (...*Glaube an das Beharrende der Substanz d.h. an das Gleichbleiben Desselben mit sich*),” by underlining the obvious: “But *Being*, the only Being that is conceded to us, is *changing*, not identical to itself (*das Sein also, welches uns einzig verbürgt ist, ist wechselnd, nicht-mit-sich-identisch*)” (Nietzsche 1970, 468; 11 [330]). In fact and by right, the reduction of a being’s coming to presence to the persistent occupation of the present cannot be justified through itself alone, and it validates, on the contrary, an injustice towards presence itself.

For there can occur an injustice of the present moment towards presence itself. In effect, in order to manifest itself in presence (*Anwesenheit*), each being must also render present what the present moment – the one where it claims to persevere – denies and forgets: the moment of the arrival not yet present (the future) and the moment of the arrival accomplished and already passed (the past). Lacking these two non-present moments of presence, the process of the entrance into and the passage through presence, the process of the *un-covering* in and through presence is obscured and re-covered by itself: the present, atomistic and in fact untenable, recovers not only the opening of the being, but, above all the process of its *un-covering* in presence. Doing right by the being in its presence supposes much more than its placement in the present, where *metaphysica* obstinately wishes to fix it and file it. Doing right by the being in its presence implies also and first of all to follow its trajectory from its not yet present presence of the arrival up to its presence already more present in the past, through the present presence that is then for the first time fully visible and fulfilled. The uncovering of the being is only fulfilled if its placement in uncoveredness – that which makes it emerge out of the cover and return there facing the other way – uncovers itself thus instead of re-covering itself by dissimulating, that is, by amputating its two non-present dimensions. Without these dimensions, the present masks presence, and it denies its process of uncovering and re-covering. Presence must be understood not only as the being uncovered in the present, but also as the passage of the being in the *un-covering*, by which we must

¹³ “Es fehlt so viel, daß man diese Eigenschaften aus der bloßen reinen Kategorie einer Substanz schließen könnten, das wir vielmehr die *Beharrlichkeit* eines gegebenen Gegenstandes aus der Erfahrung zum Grunde legen müssen, wenn wir auf ihn den brauchbaren Begriff von einer *Substanz* anwenden wollen.”

understand the emergence out of the not yet present cover and the non-present re-covering of the passing. The being only merits its present moment and only truly appears there if it imports there its emergence out of the cover; and it only fulfills its moment in the present in truth if it assumes its re-covering – the re-covering in the passed allows the being to re-cover all presence, even and including its ultimate closure, just as it re-covers the flash of its presence only by conquering it through its emergence out of the first cover. The being only becomes present if it arrives to presence; it arrives to presence only if it enters into Being in such a way that Being itself arrives in the tripartite process of the *un-covering*; the being must renounce possessing as a prize [proie] the unique atom of the present, so as to not re-cover the *un-covering* in which the passage of the arrival is fulfilled; in this way the being itself bears testimony in its present moment that it arrives according to the moments that are even not (yet or still) present moments of presence, and according to the event where presence gives itself (and gives it to itself).

Can we formulate this requirement further, or, to say it plainly, can we display it without too much play on words and by describing recognizable phenomena? In fact, without quite noticing it, we have just sketched this somewhat by our mentioning two decisive words in one phrase: “...according to the *event* where presence gives itself.”

Let us begin with the *gift*. To think Being otherwise than as the being’s persistent taking possession of the present, thus otherwise than as it is thought by *metaphysica* – the phenomenon of the gift already calls for this, and even imposes it on us, even without our noticing it. The gift in effect provokes, in inattentive everyday life, its own disappearance, its own re-covering. In effect, in the process of the gift, the given gift (the offering, the favor, the thing, etc.) enters into presence as a subsisting being that occupies the present moment; on the stage of the present moment, the gift eclipses all other actors, it conquers the space and concentrates all the attention of the beneficiary. This beneficiary, the donee, freely allows themselves to be fascinated by *this that* the gift gives, and this is so as to take possession of it and to enjoy it, to the point that the gift loses its gratuitous quality as it becomes (again) a possession that has simply changed owners, the donee replacing the donor (and is this not the very function of the gift?). Henceforth, the gift, fulfilling itself according to the exchange of owners, annuls itself as gift. For in the taking possession of presence by the gift, which seizes it along with its persevering subsistence in the present moment, the very process of the gift – the arrival of the giver getting rid of a present so as to make it present for others, thereby uncovering their benevolence – disappears in its result: the gift must certainly escape the giver, because without this there would rightly be no gift; but in doing so, the gift, which is henceforth glorified in the moment of its present, exclusive of any other on the stage of presence, masks the giver, excludes them from presence, re-covers them, makes them disappear. Ingratitude constitutes only the reverse and the moral effect of an ontic disappearance that strikes out the giver by striking out the gift given. The giver and therefore the process of the gift disappear precisely because the gift, as a given thing, appears. Must we conclude from this that the conditions of possibility of the gift are entirely of a piece with the conditions of its impossibility (Derrida)? We must suspect, on the

contrary, that the gift does not appear except as the entire process of its arrival, according to a presence in which the non-present actors and moments uncover themselves just as well as the presence in the present of the given present. Receiving the gift demands much more and something quite other than seizing possession of the given; receiving the gift consists in seeing the gift *as* given, *as* arriving from the giver who is henceforth and necessarily absent, but yet who is not only its origin (passed) but its destination [destinataire] in return – destination in the sense in which destiny sends (*Geschied*) and provokes a process of arrival, without which the gift would only appear as a brute fact, a good find, a chance meeting, without signification or intention, incapable of allowing not only recognition but even refusal, scorn, or indeed the taking possession itself. Without the shadow cast by the absent giver the gift disappears into pure meaningless contingency, a fact that draws no attention. It is here not a question of grateful recognition towards a giver who would want a reward, even if a symbolic one, for a gift that was in fact given [donné] reluctantly, half-abandoned [abandonné]; it is here a question of the right of a brute fact to get apprehended *as* having to be received (or refused), *as* arriving from elsewhere, *as* laden, even altered by alterity, waiting on the hermeneutics that makes it a gift. What we call sacrifice, i.e. the renunciation of the possession of the gift, says nothing other than this – the gift, in order for it to be received (or refused) *as* a gift, requires that the donee of the gift cross it out and make of it a reduction or a tribute, in order to direct it back to the donee who, then appearing again, *re-gives* the gift and then qualifies it, it alone, *as* gift. This signifies that the gift only appears if it uncovers itself in a presence that exceeds, and by a great deal, the present moment where its perseverant possession could limit it. The gift only uncovers itself in the *un-covering* of a presence that is fulfilled even and above all in that which exceeds the present.¹⁴

The event comes next. The gift only uncovers itself if the present does not contract itself into its present moment, but rather unfolds (lets come, lets pass and in the end lets itself be passed) in its arrival [advenue] (from the giver to the receiver) and sanctions it in recognizing this occurrence (sacrifice). The gift occurs thus. The event thus defines the *un-covering*. How? According to *metaphysica*, as has been shown,¹⁵ the event remains unintelligible, thus invisible. In effect, *l'événement* (as it is understood in classic French, moreover) signifies the final result (positive or negative) of a process, and a result that (against Hegel, or at least against the common usage of French translators) does not rebound towards its origin, but to the contrary entrenches itself in its facticity and persists there for as far as it can maintain its *epoch*, which holds the arrival in the present moment. The result, the arrived [l'arrivée] (Heidegger says *Ankunft*), re-covers – and re-covers in a persisting and persistent being, the unique and imperious owner of its present moment – the arrival (Heidegger says *Überkommenis*) of the entire process of *un-covering*. The arrived,

¹⁴ For the details of this analysis, see Marion (2005), Book II, and Marion (2010), Chapter IV.

¹⁵ See Romano. Except that Heidegger had made a decisive breakthrough [concerning the event], no doubt the first – certainly not in 1927, in *Sein und Zeit*, but in 1957 and in 1962 (see Heidegger 2006, 2007).

the finished journey, the voyage without incident, the successful transfer, sets itself up in presence reduced to its final acquisition, the station where everyone gets off, the present moment attained, possessed, conserved as much as is possible. In consequence, the *process*, the *transport*, the *displacement*, the *passing*, in short the arrival itself, disappear, excluded from the present moment: the *un-covering* finds itself therefore *in fine* re-covered. In the best of cases an inquiry, e.g. historical or technical, will be able to reconstitute the causes, conditions and antecedents of the result, but under ontic hypotheses it will dissimulate all the more the ontological process of the arrival, explaining, moreover by simple probabilities, Being by way of the being, itself reduced to its obstinacy in the present (*Beharrlichkeit*, *Vorhandenheit*). In order to think the event as an *un-covering*, we must think it starting precisely from the un-covering. It has to be that the arrived (*Ankunft*) remains visible in the process of the arrival that comes over (*Überkommenis*), and that they are bound by a contact – a contract, Heidegger says, a compromise, an accord (*Austrag*), in terms of which the displacing of the event would cover, open, and remain at work always and again in its final result, such that in return the result might, so to speak, continue to tremble and vibrate with the movement that made it possible. It would be necessary that the process of the arrival, presence without the present, remains the truth nevertheless, the *un-covering* uncovering that yet arrives at the result of the arrived itself. Here we can see the full range of what French translates, no doubt unhappily, as the *il y a* [it has there / there is], but that German calls happily the *es gibt*. We say it: the *it gives* [*cela donne*] (as in the expression that is itself well accepted, “Qu’est-ce que cela donne?” [What does it give?]). That which ‘it’ gives, the final *it*, most of the time and initially suffices to itself: the thing is *that* which it is, we know it as *it*, and we have an interest in it; it, to assure its perseverance in the present, and we, to maintain our knowledge and therefore our mastery, so that everything might stay as it is as much and for as long as is possible. Provided that it lasts! – this we must understand like so: provided that the *it* does not have to do with what it *gives*. But in the case in which ‘it’ would have the status of event, that is to say, would have no other *stature* than arriving, than surging up into presence through an arrival, then we would no longer be able to dispense with that which assigns and uncovers the *it*, with the givenness in it. The “wonder of wonders (*Wunder aller Wunder*)” then no longer settles on the being (as in the metaphysical question par excellence that only asks “Why is there something rather than nothing?” without marveling at the fact *that* there is something) but to the fact *that* the being is. *That* the being is has nothing ontic about it, does not arise from the being but rather from Being. This, at least, on condition of understanding Being in its ambivalence – other than as the persistence *in se* and *per se* of an essence in *its* Being, *in suo esse*. For Being belongs to the being no more than it limits itself to the present moment. Being, if it is necessary to accept one, *arrives as given*, the *un-covering* of presence beyond the present.

Present? But which present are we talking about? The ambivalence of the present, in effect, flashes here in full light. Is this the present moment in the sense τὸ νῦν, *nunc stans*, *jetzt*, now of *metaphysica*, or is it the present of *es gibt*, of the present *given* by presence and gift *passing* through it from the *not yet* to the *already no*

longer and there unfolding themselves equally? But then how does presence give itself when it gives the present in this sense? Does not the ambivalence of Being prolong itself, does it not culminate in the ambivalence of the *present*? For *metaphysica*, the present indicates the restriction of presence to the present moment, so it supposes (in vain, moreover, since nothing lasts) that the being can and must persevere in *its Being*, precisely because it sees itself or believes itself authorized to consider Being as its own, to render Being, so to speak, ontic and thus to confirm a forgetting so profound that it forgets its own forgetting (the being, in *metaphysica*, would thus be defined as *that which forgets itself*, in all senses of the word). For another thought of Being, the present indicates that which does not restrain itself (to the null moment), but which pours itself out and surpasses itself; that which arrives as the effect of a gift, given not only in the moment of its sending in the present, but given intrinsically, including when presence shines there no longer or not yet in a present moment. In its truth (its *un-covering*), the being, or whatever one wants to call it, only lasts for as long and insofar as it is given; it remains given, therefore (its sole perseverance resides in this repetition), at each instant of its presence, absence included; not given once and for all and then abandoned to itself, but given throughout its arrival, given so as to receive itself, to feel itself pierced through and held by givenness from one part to the other, from the surging up to the departure, in the rhythm of the *un-covering*.

To describe this, and even to get a sense of it - philosophy can hope to succeed at this. And philosophy must do so, in fact, since it alone can. But can it fulfill what it would thereby describe? *Who* might be able to show us how 'it gives,' for example gives Being, in such a way that we might accede to the Being otherwise than Being, otherwise than according to *metaphysica*?

5.

Who could carry out and fulfill right to the end (εἰς τέλος, John 13: 1) what philosophy tries to glimpse, if not the one who said in truth that all was fulfilled (τετέλεσται, John 19:30)? A hypothesis here takes shape, audacious, risky, but for that still perhaps reasonably qualified - that of sketching out another understanding and another implementation of the manner of Being of the being, and this from the manner in which Christ, passing and dwelling among us, undertook Being. It is not a question of looking for a "theological ontology," much less a "Christic ontology," but rather of looking to see how Christ *is* and *was* in another mode of Being than Being as *metaphysica* (thus ontology) understands it.

The way of Being understood by *metaphysics* is defined, as we have seen, by the persistence of each being in its Being, to the extent that it keeps and guards possession of presence. Yet, quite strangely, the mode of Being of Christ, his way of implementing what we call "Being," finds itself described in brief and quite enigmatic indications in the New Testament, but with a precision such that one can find there certain concepts that will underpin the metaphysical history of Being. In order to observe this we need only a guiding thread, supplied by a verse previously mentioned, which opens the liturgical hymn quoted by Saint Paul in the Letter to the Philippians 2:6: "ὃς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων οὐχ ἄρπαγμόν ἡγήσατο τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ - he, dwelling in the form of God, did not consider Being equal to God as a

possession-to-preserve-for-himself [a plunder].” (Philippians 2:6). A strange formulation. Strange, first of all, because it concentrates in two lines a number of technical terms of what will become the lexicon of *metaphysica* (μορφῇ, θεοῦ, ὑπάρχων, τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ), and then also because it uses a formula very rare (even unknown) in the New Testament (the infinitive τὸ εἶναι, “Being”) as complement to a term (ἀρπαγμὸν) itself rare in the Hellenic world, and unique in the New Testament. But this formulation is remarkable above all for the rigor of its argumentation: Christ is (ὑπάρχων, being at the first, at the beginning, being from himself, in his own full right) in the position and the form (μορφῇ, therefore εἶδος, therefore οὐσία, essence, even substance) of God; in the terms and according to the manner of being of *metaphysica*, he could and even should therefore take possession of this essence and substance, keep it for himself, in short, persist there as in *his* Being. He would then be, one cannot here fail to reflect, in exactly the mode of the younger son of the parable of the prodigal son, as reported by Luke: this son demands from his father his share of the property, to take possession of his οὐσία (essence and substance) in full right: “δός μοι τὸ ἐπιβάλλον μέρος τῆς οὐσίας – Give me the share of the οὐσία that comes to me” (Luke 15:12); in doing this he does nothing but follow the *conatus in suo esse perseverandi*, the effort to persist in the present possessed (needing to be possessed). And yet - and the whole intention of the hymn is at work here - Christ, himself, unlike the younger son (and all of us who are instinctively metaphysicians), rightly does not consider his οὐσία (his μορφῇ) as a piece of property to possess (ἀρπαγμὸν). But what οὐσία is at issue? An essence that rightly consists in equality to God (ἴσα θεῷ); but, since he *is already* in the form and the divine essence that *already* defines him, he does not have to claim it nor demand any sort of share of it; this equality to God signifies, for him, his equality to himself (τὸ ἑαυτοῦ): what is at issue is the implementation of the principle of identity, $A = A$, a thing is what it is and not any another thing.¹⁶ This metaphysical sense of οὐσία is understood all the more clearly as, if the term is lacking, it finds itself replaced by another, infinitely more rare but also infinitely stronger, τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ: we must therefore understand that the Christ did not consider the fact and the right of Being as *his own*, what he nonetheless was (equal to God, God himself), in short he did not consider τὸ εἶναι in general (*überhaupt, schlechthin*) as a possession, rather he disappropriated himself of it until he emptied himself of it (ἐκένωσεν, Philippians 2:7), until he willingly took on another οὐσία, the μορφῇ δούλου, that which the prodigal son undergoes unwillingly (μισθίων, employee, *Knecht, servant*, Luke 15:19). Why this inversion of roles? Why does the one who is lord (“You call me master and lord, and very well, for so I am,” John 13:13) not keep this οὐσία as his possession? Because he knows that at issue is a present given by his father, because he knows both the Father who gives and the gift that arrives (“If you knew the gift of God and the one who speaks to you,” John 4:10), and therefore that this μορφῇ and this οὐσία can only and must only be received, but never possessed, since their consistency comes

¹⁶ Moreover it is this equality with God that the Jews reproach Jesus with, as they see in it only a statement of the possession of equality by the self (with itself), ἴσων ἑαυτὸν ποιῶν τῷ θεῷ (John 5:18).

to them from elsewhere (the gift, thus the giver), not from themselves (*per se et in se*). The Christ knows what the prodigal son is ignorant of (and we too): the prodigal thinks that in recognizing himself as a slave and a servant, he loses his rank (his essence) as son, for he does not believe that the Father loves as a Father; but the Christ knows that he, in renouncing the possession of divinity, will precisely continue to receive it from his Father – "...and this is why God has exalted him and given him the name which is beyond any name" (Philippians 2:9). Paradoxically (and against all metaphysical interpretations of being), it is only the loss or the willful renunciation of persistence in essence and presence (in one's οὐσία) that allows one to receive it "a hundredfold." Whoever persists in τὸ εἶναι as in a possession, loses it; whoever loses τὸ εἶναι so as to recognize it as a gift from the Father, receives it and therefore saves it.

But how and why is there this paradox? What reveals itself here that is better for the being in general, for the human being in particular, and above all worthier of God? It is evident – and we see this already – from the Christ's implementation (who else could do this before him or, later, without him?) of the principle proposed in advance to the disciples who, themselves, could do nothing: "He who seeks his soul will lose it, and he who loses it for my sake will save it – ὁ εὐρὼν τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἀπολέσει αὐτήν, καὶ ὁ ἀπολέσας τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἕνεκεν ἐμοῦ εὐρήσει αὐτήν." (Matthew 10:39, see Mark 8:35 or Luke 9:24). But once again, this answer only displaces the question: for in the end why is it necessary, from the point of view of an understanding of Being (and not from the theological point of view of an understanding of the mystery of Christ), to give up the calm (albeit provisional) possession of self, the transcendentality of the *ego*?

A first answer comes from the account of the agony of Gethsemane when Jesus definitively inscribes himself into the figure of Christ, in other words when he assumes the perfection of his status as Son of the Father – i.e. when he exchanges his human will for the will of the Father, thus manifesting him as such and thus manifesting himself as Son, in a reciprocal glorification (John 13: 1, 32; 17:1–5). This is fulfilled with the decision upon which everything turns: "...not my will, but yours, be done – μὴ τὸ θέλημά μου ἀλλὰ τὸ σὸν γινέσθω." (Luke 22:42; see Matthew 26:39 and Mark 14:36) This decision, that turns the will around, that converts it in the strict sense from itself to another, that of the Father; this opens up in all its breadth and depth, its height and length, the trinitarian scene of the final act of Christ, in short, theology. But it also takes on a crucial significance for philosophy: the *conatus in suo esse perseverandi*, i.e. the will to possess one's οὐσία as far as one can and at any price, ends up, at the end of *metaphysica*, in the will that wills itself and wills nothing other than its own affirmation, in other words the will that wills to power its rise to power, in short, the *Wille zur Macht*. The great *Amen*, through which Nietzsche imitates and blasphemes the one "...in whom is found the *Yes*" (2 Corinthians 1:27, referring to Matthew 11:26), distinguishes itself from it in that Zarathustra only says *yes* to that which *his* own will can will and endure, while Christ says *yes* to *all* that the Father wills, and he "endures all things" (1 Corinthians 13:7). If the will to power thus defines nihilism, if nihilism itself confirms the end of *metaphysica*, we must then go so far as to suspect that to will the will of the

Father, i.e. of another *par excellence*, that to will that which *I* do not will and do not will to will, constitutes the sole and definitive response to nihilism and the final imposition of an alternative interpretation of the Being of the being.

The ambivalence of Being would therefore be played out between its acceptance according to *metaphysica* (Being as *conatus in suo esse perseverandi*, will for *one's* own power) and its trinitarian acceptance according to the *admirabile commercium* of the exchange of the will of the Son with the Father. But does there then still remain a mode of *Being* of the *being*? Without a doubt, if the Being of the being, as such, comes within creation instead of, as *metaphysica* claims without rhyme or reason, preceding it. Under what formula would this Being be said to be seen from the point of view of God, and of God revealed according to trinity? According to the principle that "Every good givenness and every perfect given (every present present) comes from above – Πᾶσα δόσις ἀγαθῇ καὶ πᾶν δῶρημα τέλειον ἄνωθεν ἐστίν." (James 1:17) Even and above all for Christ, but also for us through the derivation of adoption, there is nothing except as received, nothing that receives itself except as given, such that Being consists in receiving oneself when one has nothing yet and *is* nothing, and rendering the received given in *sur-rendering oneself*. We explicitly read this trinitarian mode of Being according to givenness: "Son, you are with me always, and all that *is* mine *is* yours – Τέκνον, σὺ πάντοτε μετ' ἐμοῦ εἶ, καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐμὰ σὰ ἐστίν." (Luke 15:31) Or: "All my things *are* yours, and yours *are* mine – καὶ τὰ ἐμὰ πάντα σὰ ἐστίν καὶ τὰ σὰ ἐμὰ." (John 17:10) In other words, the trinitarian communion of the wills of the Father and of the Son, exchanged as gifts given and giving, which are infinitely re-given one to the another in the Spirit, precedes and determines the mode of *Being* of the things that are.

So we begin to see a glimpse of light in our initial question: before asking what the right hypothesis is between God *without* Being and God *with* Being, thus before submitting God (unknown) to Being (supposedly well-known), in short before asking how God arrives [ce qu'il advient de Dieu] under the hypothesis of Being, it is necessary to understand another questioning: how does the question of Being arrive [qu'advient-il de la question de l'être] according to the hypothesis of God, in the perspective opened up by God, from the point of view of God already accepted? What becomes of the question of Being when it finds itself asked from the point of view of God? (*Was geschieht in der Seinsfrage wenn man über Sein vom Gott aus fragt?*) For, by *Being* we understand (or rather we spend our time most often *not* understanding) its ambivalence: either Being possessed as a piece of property, or Being received as a gift and returned. With *this* question, Christian thought, provided that it truly become so, could return itself to the question of Being – turn itself to it, or rather return it to God.

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